

Looking for Meaning of Existence in Rafique Ul Islam's Poetry

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A distinct voice in the realm of Modern Bengali Poetry, Rafique Ul Islam (born 1954) belongs to the 80s though the character of his poetic discourse always defies to be canonized simply in this way. Rafique Ul Islam's poetry belongs to the tradition and at the same time it aspires to move away from the so called tradition. This particular spirit has added a peculiar colour of individualism to his discourse and created a space of indeterminism there. Rafique Ul Islam's poetic relation with the tradition of Bengali Poetry is always antagonistic intimacy. He defies tradition to elevate it to a new height. The creative use of Indian, Arabian and Greek myths has equipped his poetry with this power of widening the periphery of poetic realm of Bengali poetry. Rafique Ul is distinctly different from the band of young poets of his canonical decade. Rather, some traces of Rabindranath Tagore and Alope Sarkar are to be found in him. His is a voice, distant, inaudible but powerful, and our perceptions gradually get overwhelmed. Reading Rafique Ul is a reading of the world of silence which is built up carefully by words and suggestive spaces.

Rafique Ul started publishing his poetry in poetry-journals and poetry-outlets in the beginning of 80s and his debut collection of poems called *Jaler Moto Sukhe Achi* saw the light of day in 1985. It was followed by *Shab ar Shabda Bhairavi* (1989), *Maitreyo Ratri Pathe* (1993), *Amader Bristipater Majhkhane* (1997, 2nd Edn. 2000), *Sonali Shibir* (2001), *Plabonrekha Chunye* (2001) and *Bhin Ganer Kathati* (2005). In the first two collections, Rafique is palpably realistic. In the poems, collected in the first two books, Rafique has attempted to depict the joys and woes of the suffering humanity around him. Like all other young new-comers, here Rafique has allowed himself to be sensitively overwhelmed by the physical and mental suffering of the world around. But in the third book Rafique has delved deep into himself and attempted to comprehend the essence of life under the surface. *Maitreyo Ratri Pathe* (1993) is a book where Rafique discovered a new voice of his own and in this book Rafique has discovered the world of his poetic perception, to be narrated to his own self in such a way that a selection of over-perceptive selves overhears him. To read him means to overhear him, because his poetry is one kind of whisper, whisper of mysterious being of the human self.

The conception of the book's title is unique. *Maitreyo* refers to 'Buddha' who lived many lives to explore the true essence of life in relation to the life in the past incarnation and also in that to the incarnation of the future. The boundary of time has been uprooted and extended infinitely to the realm of the past and that of the future. Rafique has attempted here to build up a discourse of the known and the unknowable. Human life is not singularly a human life but a collective life of all the lives we gradually lived like Buddha in different incarnations and a wistful reminiscing of the future life to be lived by us. In different poems of this book, Rafique is found

unwilling to conform to this present world. To conform to the present world means to conform to the stark realism. And the spirit of stark realism distracts one to see life in a broad perspective. Life is not an effervescent bubble but the blooming of a collective life, rooted in the past and the future. So, Rafique is spiritually realistic. It confirms that Rafique is not antagonistic to the life around but he is not blinded by the assuming truth of life because he instinctively knows the world is an expression of a greater world. In this sense, we can claim that Rafique's poetry is that of the present which essentially bridges the past and the future. In this book, Rafique has cast his look over a wide canvas, rarely explored in modern poetry in Bengali. Life is not something limited to human life, but something that encompasses the slightest tremor of an ant to the big-bang of a blast. Rafique's oeuvres, here, attempt to rediscover life an epical sense.

Amader Bristipater Majhkhane (1997, 2nd edition, 2000) is thematically a continuation of the preceding book. The use of myth and mythical anecdotes has given the poems in this collection a mysterious profundity. The imagery of water in different forms has made the book unique in the realm of Bengali poetry. The use of the particular image, symbol and sign of water reminds us of Hopkins, Eliot and Bishnu Dey. Water is the source of life. Water is the beginning of existence. The decoding of this repeated use of water-symbol confirms that Rafique Ul attempts to discover life's relation with primordial existence. The use of water with multiple connotations is to be seen in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and J. M. Synge's play *Riders to the Sea*. It is to be noted that water as a symbol in Rafique always evokes multiple emotions, associated with life, a life that connects the past, the present and the future. Water is this connecting force that makes the temporal boundaries crumbling easily.

Sonali Shibir (2001) is another unique collection of poems by Rafique Ul. *Fish-life*, *Ending Time* and *Nursing Home*— three long poems in this book, speak highly of Rafique Ul's poetic caliber. In *Fish-life*, the poet has metamorphosed himself into a fish and seen life which is tormented eternally by the apprehension of death. In the fine poem *Ending Time*, the poet instinctively perceives his former lives and ethereal future existence. It is a wonderful poem which takes us to a new world of perception. It is 'poetry of the future'; to borrow a term from Sri Aurobindo's seminal book *The Future Poetry*. In *Nursing Home*, a long poem of ten parts, Rafique sees life in the silhouette of death. Here the presence of death helps the poet rediscover life and reaffirm his faith in life.

In the book *Bhin Ganyer Kathati* (2005), Rafique comes to be realistic, to some extent. The personal tragedy of losing a dear one, the ailing health and the gloom of life has brought the poet nearer to the suffering world. Still, the poetic faith in Rafique is the same. He believes that life is not isolation. Life is an expression of collective life, life of the flora and fauna. It's Rafique Ul's conviction that the world, the universe, the entire cosmological entity, speak through a poetic voice. The personal tragedy and gloom of the suffering mankind has farther intensified that conviction in Rafique. Rafique Ul's poetry is an attempt to create a bridge between the personal and the universal, a bridge between the past and the future, a bridge between the

earthly and the divine as well as a bridge between the known and the unknowable. Realism and beyond-realism meet here in his poetry. Actually a watertight compartment of realism and that of surrealism do not exist in this world of our perceptions.

Jiyarat (2009) indicates a new phase of Rafique Ul's poetry which is characterized by a spiritual quest. In this book Rafique Ul has used numerous Islamic myths and references to understand the multiplicity of life from diverse perspectives but the message his poems send is not limited to any religiosity. His is a search which takes him through rituals of the tradition of a particular religious sect but ultimately makes him reach at a broad space of humanism which cares for every living being in this universe. This spiritual humanism implies an attitudinal shift from unipolar homo-centricism to multipolar bio-centricism. Nature has occupied an important space in Rafique Ul's poetic imagination here in the poems in this book. But the treatment of the natural theme in Rafique Ul is different from that in the poets to be known as the poets of Nature. Nature in Rafique Ul is the primordial being which is an essential component of human life.

In the next book *Ardhek Chander Janye* the search continues and encompasses a larger space. Here the poet means to assert that an identity of a man is not and should not be determined by the vocabulary of nationalism and politics. Humanism is an all-encompassing love that defies the borders of nationalism, sectarian politics and narrow religiosity. When others bother about cross-border terrorism, Rafique Ul discovers the perennial quest of the human selves for meeting together and embracing. Hands are meant not for picking up treacherous knives but hugging intimately. Poetry is not the exclusively depiction of what human beings are but this also includes what human beings could and should aspire to be. The poems in this book are deeply rooted in the age old tradition of Bengali culture.

In terms of linguistic contribution Rafique Ul has done an important job. He has used numerous Arabic, Urdu and Persian words in his poetry. By doing so he has extended and enlivened the tradition that has got enriched from the works of Kazi Nazrul Islam and Sayed Muztaba Ali. But his employment of these words and phrases never sounds foreign; rather it gets organically integrated to the superstructure of his discourse design. Poetry content language, new poetry, celebration of words.

Jiyarat and *Ardhek Chander Janye* are numerous prayers in numerous forms for all humanity struggling to come out of the slush of consumerism, bigotry, moral bankruptcy and spiritual sterility. In spite of numerous references to seamy sides of life Rafique Ul's poetry affirms faith in life. Sometimes his is an observation, bizarrely bitter and full of disgusts. But negativity is no final say and no final colour in a Rafique canvas. Negativity is only a shade on which his affirmation of faith in life looks distinct and poignant. Rafique Ul's poetry is to be delineated as the songs of experience which emerge out of life's long journey through vicissitudes. He achieves the state of *paradisso* by experiencing the burns of the *inferno* and the *purgatorio*. Reading Rafique Ul is to read and re-live life in one's very

intimate self. His is the poetry of silence which does not state but evokes a world of meaning, to be felt inwardly and not to be articulated to the fullest.

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