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## Dr Santosh Bakaya: A poetic voice championing peace

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### ABSTRACT

Post-Independence Indian English Poetry marked a momentous emergence of women's poetic voices. Scads of fresh voices echoed on the poetic horizon, captivating the world's attention. Now, female poets audaciously unbosom feelings, impressions, visions, as well as concerns through ink. The present piece is an analysis of Dr Santosh Bakaya 's writings, a woman writer who has created a niche for herself in the English literary scene with her works, which cover poems, short stories, essays, novels and novellas, and Ballad of Bapu, a poetic biography of Mahatma Gandhi that received her great awards [Vitasta 2015].

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### Introduction:

In the world of poetry, in Post-Independence India, a vast number of Indo-Anglian Woman Poets, owing to their poetry prowess and creativity, touched new heights of fame and name. Their literary contributions demonstrate that their level of creativity is not lagging behind that of their male colleagues. In this regard, Iyengar reads:

*"Certainly, the women poets of today have dared all that men had dared, and they have few inhibitions. Freedom and energy often team together, but there is also a need to go beyond the recurrent sense of hurt and appetite for strife, and reach the beauty, harmony, peace, and fulfillment. And this is on the women poets' agenda too."*(Iyengar, 1985)



Among such woman poets, Gouri Deshpande, Eunice de Souza, Mamata Kalia, Kamala Das, Lila Ray, Monika Varma, Suniti Namjoshi, Meena Alexander, and Roshen Alkazi can be cited as brilliant examples. **Dr Santosh Bakaya**, too, is an academician, novelist, poet, essayist, and editor, who is quickly rising to prominence as India's most important poet and who won recognition from all around the world for *Ballad of Bapu*, her poetic version of Mahatma Gandhi's biography [Vitasta Publishers, 2015]. She is a brilliant star in the Indian English poetry firmament. In May 2016, she was also presented with the Universal Inspirational Poet Award by the Ghana Government and Pentasi B. Also, In the Pentasi B World Friendship poetry, she is featured.

In 2014, because of her lengthy poem **OH HARK!**, which is now included *in THE SIGNIFICANT ANTHOLOGY*, she won the International Reuel Award for Literature and Writing. The INCREDIBLE WOMAN OF THE YEAR 2015 Award was created by the Incredible Women of India blog, which she has also awarded. The Poet Laureate award, 2017, instituted by the Poetry Society of India, was conferred on her for her book *Ballad of Bapu*, *Oh Hark!*, and *Where Are The Lilacs?* A Collection of Peace Poems [Authors Press, 2016]. The Tejaswani Award was presented to her on International Women's Day [MARCH 2017] by the Aagman and Literary and Cultural group [DELHI]. In July 2017, Bharat Nirman awarded her the Literacy Excellence Award. She has been a delegate in many literature festivals, as one of the delegates to the SAARC SUFI FESTIVAL [Jaipur, November 2017]

Contemporary poetic imagination feeds on the fodder of all that betides day in and day out across the globe, which in turn provides the thematic concerns in today's poetry. The feelings about living in a war-torn world where "*mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*" are underscored. Indian English poetry, too, rests on such feelings and thoughts. In recent decades, poetry in India has been seen advancing with great zeal and rapidity, resulting in an increasing number of poetry books being published by numerous publishing houses each year. Indian English poetry from the past decade is peculiar and productive in its utilization of nativism. Which can be described as intensely felt Indianism. Various English poets, including Shiv K. Kumar, Manas Bakshi, Susheel Kumar Sharma, R. K. Singh, and K. V. Raghupati, compose poetry that is characterized by nativism and is written with élan. And how can her poetry be devoid of local color and nativism? In her poetry, she explores her origins in her homeland and country, echoing K. N. Daruwalla:

*"Then why should I tread the Kafka beat or the wasteland*

*When mother, you are near at hand, one vast, sprawling defeat."*



The lines "*When a father's soi shlahk [nettle thrashing] hurt, but became a love balm/ Soothing the thrashings soon to pierce the sylvan calm*" [NO LONGER', p 82-83, *Under the Apple Boughs*, Authorspress, Delhi, 2017]

Or the lines, "*Az roz saine dilber myaney (Stay the night with us, O sweetheart mine)*" [IS THAT THE SUN IN YOUR EYES? P 24 *UNDER THE APPLE BOUGHS*, AUTHORS PRESS, DELHI, 2017] demonstrates that Santosh Bakaya, despite using a foreign language when writing, maintains the tradition of R K Narayan, Sarojni Naidu, Ruskin Bond, together with other greats, along with her native language.

"*Publishing a volume of verse is like dropping a rose petal down the Grand Canyon and waiting for an echo*", said Donald Marquis, an American author as well as journalist. Well, what if instead of dropping petals into the Grand Canyon, you decide to sit on the edge of the Canyon and sing?! What miracles will the echoes wrought then?! Santosh Bakaya, with her three wonderful poetic collections: *Ballad of Bapu*, *Where Are the Lilacs?* And *Under the Apple Boughs*, has precisely done that-she sits by the Canyon of her imagination and sings. The echoes are that of a Philomel.

*Ballad of Bapu*, first published in 2015, is an internationally acclaimed book, hailed so benignly in literary circles. However, the book describes the incidents and events that took place in Bapu, Gandhi's life, poetically, by Dr. Santosh Bakaya. It is not written in the same scientific style as Gibbon's "Rise and Fall of the *Roman Empire*", nor written with the intention of presenting it to the readers as a work of history. Absolutely not! It is exclusively composed as a biography, especially with regard to a person with "*a fistful of salt and steel in his heart.*"

"*Autobiographies are lies,*" in the Preface of his writings, G.B. Shaw, *Autobiography*. Maybe it is true! However, while reading 'The Ballad of Bapu', it is essential to acknowledge that biographies are not always accurate. Santosh Bakaya portrays Gandhi in a manner consistent with historical records, neither as a Christ nor a Mephistopheles. Even though the book has been interwoven with the yarn of poetry, which inevitably fictionalizes the events and incidents, to use the words of Shakespeare "*where the poet's eye ... gives to airy nothings a local habitation and a name*", in *Ballad of Bapu*, I observed no exaggeration, no out-of-the-blue incidents, and no imagining of the events that would have rendered Gandhi is a fictional character. The author's portrayal of Gandhi in verse and his contemporary status are consistent with the real Gandhi. This renders the book impartial, and if someone wants to read about Gandhi in a single book, including a history or political scholar, "*Ballad of Bapu*" is the repository.



Politically, Santosh Bakaya has no agenda and is neither a leftist nor a rightist. Gandhi is neither glorified nor despised by her. To the contrary, she presents us with a man who possesses both his assets and his shortcomings. Yes, she achieves the “*Negative Capability*”, In his objective biography of Gandhi, John Keats discussed the subject. For instance, the following lines,

*“Not a divine person  
But only one with sensibilities fine.  
Not endowed with powers from above  
This frail figure created a symphony of love”*

[p 197, **BALLAD OF BAPU, VITASTA, DELHI, 2015**]

ensure that Gandhi is presented to the readers in an impartial manner. The objective and apolitical nature of Santosh Bakaya is indicative of what Eliot refers to as “*impersonal*” as against falling to “*Romantic subjectivism.*”

Santosh Bakaya, a diminutive poet, is a peace-loving individual who yearns for the establishment of peace, fraternity, and love in society. In her work of peace poetry, “*Where are the Lilacs?*” versifies “*let the bird in the cage serenade us with notes of peace.*” She desires, as did Rabindranath Tagore's aspiration for his country to be a place “*where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls*”, where the monsters such as Caste division, national prejudice and, jingoism, which have devoured today's India as a result of wrong and fanatical policies, are thrown into a deep, dark bay, never to return.

Readers who desire to delve deeply into the book's verses will find it accessible due to its concise language. The author has also succeeded in this regard, as I have, having unknowingly memorized numerous lines from the book after reading it twice. By savoring the lines that the author writes about the Jallianwallabagh atrocity, the reader can determine the book's magnetizing effect on their thought process:

*“With cruelty was massacred an innocent throng  
But in this action, Dyer found nothing wrong  
The man remarked that it was unfair  
With an insanely pompous air  
That he only wanted to shoot well and strong.”*

[p 149, **BALLAD OF BAPU, VITASTA, DELHI, 2015**]



Alternatively, the line about Gandhi that captivates:

*"The meek youth was now a leader of men  
Who could preach, moralize, and wield the pen!  
To his client his first duty lay  
Legal practice is no child's play  
So he now tried to hone his legal acumen!"*

**[P23, BALLAD OF BAPU, VITASTA, DELHI, 2015]**

Another fascinating work of hers is a 100-page-long, surrealistic poem, *Oh Hark!*, for which she was awarded the International Reuel Award for literature and writing in 2015. Playfully macabre and funnily grotesque, it follows a straightforward rhyming quatrains pattern, holding the reader spellbound as an ensemble of weird characters keeps emerging from her hat. In this connection, let me quote another prolific poet-critic, Dr Ampat Koshy, who has written the introduction to this poem in *THE SIGNIFICANT ANTHOLOGY* —[MORPH BOOKS, BANGALORE, 2015 ], where it first appeared.

He says: *"Her verses remind one of Dali's surrealism and Hieronymus Bosch's paintings, and 'the suspense as to what may happen next and her sharp, observant eye for realistic detail in the midst of imagining a world we have to be introduced to, uniquely hers, not having existed before, which she creates anew from her curious mind of brilliant things, odds and ends, bric a brac and trivia as well as echoes and sudden flashes of depth and profundity, literally right before our eyes."*

I would love to reproduce a few stanzas from the poem, in which we come across a gory resurrection of the tricoteuse, Madame Defarge, of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* [1859]. Besides this knitter, the poem is replete with many other interesting characters, like the drummer, the midget, the writer recluse, a poet, and a father hunting for his lost daughter.

Let me quote some enchanting lines from this long poem:

*"Blood was flowing from her cracked mouth and nose  
She dipped into her pocket and pulled out a wilted rose.  
Then, running her tongue over a loose tooth, she shouted.  
Put a hand on the poet's arm, winked, and then pouted.*



*Suddenly, the javelin man felt insanely exuberant.  
"I am a double black-belt", he said, his voice belligerent.  
At the knitter, with incredible force, he hurled his javelin  
She shrugged and re-joined with a gore-garnished grin.  
  
"Figures", she mouthed, wiping the blood with a sleeve.  
"You have left me with no choice but to believe".  
Suddenly the jungle resounded with growls and roars  
The wind howled with the sound of rattling of doors.  
  
In panic they looked around, their curiosity uncurbed  
What was it, had some sleeping giant been disturbed?  
Her blood-streaked mouth made little burps of sound  
The threesome watched, mouths ajar, eyes round."*

[p 326 *The Significant Anthology*, MORPH BOOKS, BANGALORE, 2015]

Every poet mirrors the *ziet giest* of the age he belongs to, and in our age the canvas no longer reflects the colours of rainbow, bowery boughs, serpentine waters and the ilk. Wading through the profusely luxuriant garden of Dr Santosh Bakaya's, *Where Are The Lilacs?*, [AUTHORSPRESS, DELHI 2016], the reader does not miss a painful but concerned heart of a human being, nor is the memory of the chiasmic and peace-yearning songs of a tender-hearted flautist effaced from his mind as he recollects them in tranquillity always and ever. The poet seems to have given language to a long trail of dreams after waking up from her sleep on the banks of Lidder, the Dal, under the shades of lush groves of verdurous trees- the nightmarish dream of blood-soaked streets, broken promises, and curtailed flights of birds of peace.

The poet expatiates on the doom the whole humanity is heading to because of a mad rat race for arms and ammunition, nuclear war and colonial expansions, but simultaneously brings home a candid message to the reader and the world that if we don't take the bull of the challenging warmongering by its horns, the whole humanity is in for an irrevocable holocaust. The poet vociferatingly asks us why Thor should catch us unawares and why we should allow his destructive powers to unleash a reign of terror across all the crannies of the globe. The poet dares us if we dare to tolerate the pain and shrieks in the refugee camps, in the blood-drenched streets, in the hospitals where scads of war victims and the oppressed lie bruised without eyesight, with their amputated arms and legs.



In one of her interviews, she very passionately says, "*Kashmir for me is not just a geographical entity, it is a symbol of love, peace, and harmony. The snowmen, the snow-clad mountains, the poplars and the pines, the boat rides and boatmen all form part of this idyllic setting, speaking of that inherent harmony in nature and the people ...*" In all her poems, there is a strong undercurrent of that yearning for peace, and a resurrection of the pristine purity and harmony which her homeland, Kashmir, was known for.

She proves a champion of peace and warrior against all kinds of tyrannical oppressions when she throws up the gauntlet and advocates the voice of a three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, Gowhar Nazir, Burhan, Danish Farooq, and many others, and protests:

*"How can I remain mum  
In the face of so many dead?  
Will you order the chopping off of my head  
Because I write...?"*

[p 81 NO, I CANNOT REMAIN MUM, *WHERE ARE THE LILACS?* AUTHORSPRESS, DELHI, 2016]

In her Foreword to *Where are the Lilacs?*, Reena Prasad beautifully describes Santosh Bakaya's yearning for love, peace, and hope:

*"She [Santosh Bakaya] grows peace trees in the hope that they might grow into intransigent forests of love, tripping up and halting the encroaching deserts of angst, violence, and terror. In this mad chaos of a world hurting towards self-destruction, her hope is the maddest of all and yet the sanest."*

Santosh Bakaya's 2017 book, *Under the Apple Boughs*, which is divided into four categories—Memory Shards, Crippled Rhyme, Nature Sings a Symphony, and O Africa! —is another exploration of the poetic realm. Every segment resembles a reflection of the name given to it. The section in particular and the entire book in general are both important 'poet's eye rolls in a fine frenzy' not giving 'airy nothings...a name' but she deals in the concrete with concrete experiences, having faith in a vital language that is 'word-hunting' and 'image-hunting'.

For instance, consider the following lines:

*In the neighbour's courtyard, the guava tree  
still stands like a sly sentry, green with envy*



*The magpie robin chirps frantically*

**[P 22 ON REVISITING MY CHILDHOOD HOME,  
UNDER THE APPLE BOUGHS, AUTHORS PRESS DELHI, 2017]**

"Poetry is for me Eucharistic. You take someone else's suffering into your body, their passion comes into your body, and in doing that, you commune, you take communication. You make a community with rhyme". When the reader navigates the rough and "crippled rhyme" of the second section, "**Crippled Rhyme**," where poetry is revealed as humanity's primary weapon against life's joys, sorrows and a tool for creating a sense of resistance against injustice, Marry Karr's words come to life. This section bears a striking resemblance to the majority of the poems in her first book of peace poems. "**Where are the Lilacs?**" She experiences a deep sense of anguish as she observes the world engulfed in a cauldron of hatred, animosity, national prejudice, social evils, war, and weapons, which has sunk the whole human race to the depths of obfuscation as well as destruction. A lot of poems are soul-scathing. In the following line of poetry:

*In an audacity of triumph wild, the monster fled.  
The boy's dreams bled, painting the cul-de-sac red.*

**(CUL-DE-SAC, p 81, Under the Apple Boughs, Authors Press, 2017)**

Or,

*Mommy, I do not want to sleep in this carton  
How can this carton be my bed?  
It is so hard, mommy  
I miss my toys, mommy  
Take me in your arms mommy*

*The night is stormy.*

**(I DO NOT LIKE MY NEW NAME, p 90, Under the Apple Boughs, 2017)**

Or,

*Somewhere, a truck becomes a weapon of destruction  
Filling people with untimely loss and desolation.  
But the birds carry on cruising, the butterflies jitterbugging  
Unaware of the scene's heart-tugging*



*Unleashing relentlessly in the barbaric world.*

**(NOT A FIG, p 96 , Under the Apple boughs , Authorspress , Delhi , 2017 )**

Or,

*Why do humans want to paint life*

*In splashes of crimson hatred?*

**(WHEN HUMANITY WEPT, 147, Under the Apple Boughs, Delhi, 2017)**

A diminutive soul, Santosh Bakaya, who absorbs the pain and sorrow of humanity, Empathizing with the suppressed and crying and wailing alongside them all, Whether a mother is anticipating their kid, who is elusive, the stifled aspirations of rag picker, the incessantly slogging laborer, or the travails and tribulations of a refugee child.

In the context of diction and language, Santosh Bakaya appears to be highly influenced by the writing styles of Elizabethan, Romantic, Neo-classical, Victorian, and Modern literary titans, as a result of her extensive reading of both classic and modern literature. For this reason, she seems to defy the diction that is popular. Victorianism and Romanticism are peppered throughout her writings. However, her writings are consistently defined by a vivid sense of symphony and musicality. The line "*I stumbled and tumbled, grumbled and mumbled, fumbled and then almost crumbled on the staircase*" is a testament to her passion for rhythm and symphony, which she aspires to experience in the world.

After reading and reviewing all of her books, I must admit that the author's remarkable use of language and figures of speech is her most remarkable quality. Sometimes, I ponder how she manages to capture such beautiful and apt words. She is a writer who, I must add, really knows how to "dress" her "thought" in beautiful "language."

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