

ENCOURAGING VOICE OF THE FUTURE, 50 haiku by Manu Kant by Dimitar Anakiev

In the world of cosmopolitan haiku poetry, many people write haiku in one way or another having actually nothing to say; other haiku poets, again, only pretend to speak through the form of haiku poetry but this is not the case with Manu Kant, a haiku poet from Chandigarh, India. He has plenty of things to say to the world, to humanity, to people, to himself and he is able to speak colorfully by using different styles of composing haiku poems. His poetic expression by its powerfulness can be compared with haiku poetry of Richard Wright or James Kirkup in the West and Kobayashi Issa and Santoka Taneda in the East. At the same time, he is one of the most talented poets in the present day world of haiku poetry and the most socially engaged poet. His poetry is personal and fresh, full of fascinating ideas linking the most paradoxical worlds. He is radically human as a poet must be. We can say he is a new, contemporary „jiyuritsu“ poet, or even left-wing Gendai, but before all he is unique Indian haiku poet who brings completely new dimension to haiku, perhaps more original of original.

O road workers!
come hither, please
& show me thy fate line

In a very personal, subjective manner, like talking to a second person (that is why „easyness“ and spontaneity) this haiku is actually a very deep juxtaposition, comparing dialectical aspect „road worker“ with metaphysical „fate line“. A dramatic and very poetic confrontation of dialectic (materialistic) and metaphysical (idealistic) aspect of philosophy and the world. This poem is a masterpiece, a work of poetic genius. One of my favorite in this collection! At the same time, indirectly but not less strong, the poem is very engaged, full of real emotion of sympathy. As it says: „a worker has no fate line; his hand has only calluses. That means „No idealism for the working class. Only fight for the life....“ So „easy“ and a soft poem but actually very hard and tight. This is another juxtaposition, another contrast, formal one: a lightness of form (a manner of expression) confronts hardness of meaning. We can see the complexity of poem and virtuosity where form of expression strictly follows the meaning even without using the most important word, probably the real topic: „calluses“ (haiku is an art of omission!) .

during a break
the coffee house cook
picking his teeth

Contrary to the subjective style of the first poem, this poem is written as „shasei“ (an objective sketch from life) - a favourite technique of Masaka Shiki. Around

„shasei“ is written the whole strategy of Hototogisu Haiku School, which later became the school of classical haiku led by Takahama Kyoshi. The „shasei“ seems pretty banal and unimportant but actually it is a doctrinaire poem. It shows what to watch in our life. As Matsuo Basho said in his famous doctrinaire poem „watch mountain violet by the road“, Manu Kant says: „watch cook picking his teeth“. It wants to say: „Do not watch only what people want to show, watch behind, watch hidden, watch what is not usually seen... watch ugly things... not only beautiful.“ From an aesthetic point of view this poem can also be understood as a manifesto of expressionism; of seeking beauty in ugliness....“

the laughing Buddha
tell me
what was so funny about your times?

It seems only as a parody but this poem brings an historic dimension to the „Buddha laugh“. Western parvenu „Zen masters“ like to imitate „Zen school“ in haiku but Indian poet, a poet from the country of origin of Buddhism, adds real „Zen“ viewpoint to the topic (if we understand that „Zen view“ means watching things with „new eyes“). So, without imitating „Zen“ – what is an „anti-Zen“ attitude - Manu Kant shows a real „a fresh viewpoint“ of laughing Buddha, bringing the historic aspect. This is really Zen. Zen monk Santoka was a known socialist by his political views and a very engaged poet. He was detained many times on his poetic wonderings and accused of espionage on behalf of the USSR by the Japanese fascist regime. Being „Zen“ does not mean being „apolitical“. Quite contrary. The Buddhist monk Saigyō Hōshi, the famous tanka poet who was a role model to Basho, openly wrote about political problems of his time. Zen monk Santoka wrote a real anti-war poem during the Japanese 1939 invasion of China:

Legs and arms
left in China - you are
back to Japan
-Santoka (1940)

And really: what was so funny in Buddha's times? For the first time we see haiku as a tool of historical analysis. Impressive, something we did not know haiku can do. In the poetry of Hoshinaga Fumio, we see haiku as a tool of historical reconstruction; haiku as a tool of historical revival of Kuma tribe. In the poetry of Manu Kant we also see haiku as a tool of historical analysis.

class reunion
from which victorious battles
are you back?
which just wars have you waged?

This is another haiku pointing towards an historical analysis. „Class reunion“ is another name for the ideology and the politics of „nationalism“. The phraseology of workers' movement considers „class reunion“ as politics of „social dialogue“, „workers peace“ policy and „class collaboration“. It is an old capitalist strategy. “We had „class reunion“ also during the different regimes of Stalinism when it was known under the name of „Popular Front“ (Narodni Front) opposed to “class Front“. Popular Front was invented to stop the revolution and to start building a nation. This poem of Manu Kant is a frank step towards historical analysis. It questions the politics of nationalism. Manu Kant asks big questions through his poetry as all big poets did – like Basho, like Santoka, like Issa Kobayashi, like Saigyō.

late night hour
still the measured steps
of a waiter

Very precise „shasei“ (an objective sketch from the reality) pointing how a profession marks the personal life. A job forms the worker. Measured steps are like measured drinks waiters have every day. Measuring is his life. The same idea as Manu Kant has expressed we also find in Issa Kobayashi's well-known poem:

The man pulling radishes
pointed my way
with a radish.
-Issa (Translated by Robert Hass)

Issa like Manu Kant was a great humanist and a very expressive poet. The farmer is marked with his job just like a waiter. He can point the way only with a radish. It is his life.

looking closely
the toilers - almost human
yet the work they do!

The public manner of writing („looking closely“) that was used by Basho with an idea to educate readers is here also used by Manu Kant. He too wants to educate people; he wants to point their attention towards topics he thinks people must know and must consider. In this case it is „ä worker's life“ - is worker a human? Almost!

begging at the top of his voice
aah! the freedom of speech
so cherished by the petty bourgeois

This is contemporary political haiku with a very popular main stream question:

„freedom of speech“. What does it mean for a beggar? What is the meaning of it to the poor and the oppressed? Yes, it is only a bourgeois „sport“. The famous Spanish film director Louis Buñuel got an Oscar award for his 1972 film *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*.

In this haiku of Manu Kant we have a similar idea.

the massive jugs
of a pavement vendor woman
yes, yes, I would love to be her baby!

I like this poem for its open and naive eroticism but also because it has a hidden social meaning behind it. Eroticism is used here as a tool for placing social ideas in a way that will be broadly accepted and understood.

summer drought
the whole world
bonsai

Here we have a surprising juxtaposition „summer drought“ and „bonsai“ in an ascetic, thick expression. Summer drought is compared with the art of bonsai. It wants to say that climate changes are also a human art. An ecological poem with a brilliant association.

you swear by your Santa
I have seen kid rag pickers
giving our world a second chance

This is a poem with probably the biggest dimension, biggest volume in the book. And I believe it is one of the biggest poems in general. A poem-mountain. It has almost a dimension of a movie. It has spectacular manner of a movie. It criticises, giving spectacular juxtaposition of two contrasted symbols „Santa“ and „kid rag pickers“ but it also gives a hope for this „world of ours“ inhabited with Santas & kid rag pickers. It is really a beautiful poem which shows the warm human face of social criticism and engaged poetry.

In this short analysis I have pointed only some of the interesting aspects that probably are not easy to understand to the reader accustomed to stereotypical interpretation of haiku poetry. There are many other and different aspects in poetry of Manu Kant too: anthropological, ethnic, personal... A great poetry coming from a great poet of a great nation. This collection shows that humanity will have a second chance if it is seen from the perspective of so-called „the third world“. It seems that worlds „No.1 and No. 2“ have nothing more important to say as well as effete „postmodern“ aesthetics. They are already the past. In that way poetry of Manu Kant can be seen as an encouraging voice of the future.