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Dominique Hecq

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Abstract:

This paper traces in three movements the experience of an imaginary and symbolic encounter with poet Bashabi Fraser: *anticipation, encounter, engagement*. The paper incorporates three poems by Fraser together with my poetic responses and reflections on that dialogic process. The paper documents how, taking into account the editors' brief, I approached the task of responding poetically to three of Fraser's poems: 'Teesta and the Transforming Flood of 1968', 'Goa', and 'Himalayan Secrets', and how and why I wrote 'Apology to Kavia', 'Gomanchala', and the 'mourner's riposte' to 'Himalayan Secrets'. The paper has a real catch.

Biographical note:

Dominique Hecq grew up in the French-speaking part of Belgium. She now lives in Melbourne. With a BA in Germanic Philology, an MA in literary translation, and a PhD in English, Hecq writes across genres and disciplines – and sometimes across tongues. Her creative works include a novel, three collections of stories, and nine volumes of poetry. Among other honours such as the Melbourne Fringe Festival Award for Outstanding Writing and Spoken Word Performance, the Woorilla Prize for Fiction, the Martha Richardson Medal for Poetry, the New England Poetry Prize, and the inaugural AALITRA Prize for Literary Translation (Spanish to English), Dominique Hecq is a recipient of the 2018 International Best Poets Prize administered by the International Poetry Translation and Research Centre in conjunction with the International Academy of Arts and Letters.

Keywords:

Collaboration – subjective encounter – cultural engagement – poetry

Anticipation

It is with a mixture of excitement and trepidation that I undertook this project focusing on India-Australia exchange through poetry. Excitement because I love the element of surprise that comes with all collaborations. Trepidation because having only briefly visited India some thirty years ago and knowing nothing of the poet I was partnered with, I had some misgivings about my ignorance.

So, I initiated a virtual meeting with Bashabi Fraser thanks to the Royal Literary Fund:

Bashabi Fraser is a poet, children's writer and critic academic. Her publications include *Rabindranath Tagore* (2019), *The Homing Bird* (2017), and *Letters to my Mother and Other Mothers* (2015).

Bashabi's awards include the Word Masala Foundation Award for Excellence in Poetry (2017) and Outstanding Woman of Scotland conferred by Saltire Society on their 2015 list. She is a committee member of Scottish Pen, Poetry Association of Scotland and Writers in Prison Committee (Scotland), Patron of the Federation of Writers (Scotland), and is Honorary Vice President of ASLS.

Bashabi is Director of the Scottish Centre of Tagore Studies and has taken early retirement from her position as Professor of English and Creative Writing at Edinburgh Napier University, where she is now Professor Emerita.

I noted that Bashabi Fraser and I shared some biographical and professional traits – both exiles, a literary background, academic experience, professional engagement outside the academy, and sustained creative output across genres.

I was particularly interested in Bashabi's journey of displacement, wondering whether there would be traces of memories she had left behind in her poetry or signs anticipating a better life in Scotland – whatever better may mean. I also wondered whether she missed her natal country, felt at home in Scotland, or carried within herself an inner restlessness and nomadic spirit. Perhaps I was already projecting, or at any rate allowing the transference that is inevitable in all human interactions to take place: I do not feel at home anywhere, but rather always *en route*.

As a member of PEN with three years of experience working in a maximum security prison, I was intrigued by Bashabi's active involvement with PEN and the prison system, and looked forward to discussing the representation of oppression and its flipside, resistance. I looked through my many scrapbooks and found in my 2007 tattered ledger a quote from Edward Said's *The Politics of Knowledge*: 'To testify to a history of oppression is necessary, but it is not sufficient unless that history is redirected into intellectual process and universalized to include all sufferers' (2000: 382). I had scribbled underneath the quotation: *how about creative process???* *As for universalising ¿Qué sabe? Appropriating???*

I was starting to fantasise about the movement of heart and home and art in Bashabi Fraser's work. A pure act of the imagination. An inner dialogue. I was ready for the real one.

Encounter

My unlikely encounter with Bashabi Fraser was facilitated by email: five poems from which I had to pick three. I chose three pieces evoking Indian landscapes, or settings, in similar prosodies and forms: 'Teesta and the Transforming Flood of 1968', 'Goa', and 'Himalayan Secrets', though kept 'Everest' as an option because of its contrapuntal approach to history, hoping to quiz the author about the work's genesis and intent in order to respond to it without misunderstandings. But the author remained silent, no doubt due to over-commitments. I was left with three poems and a 'scriptor' (Barthes 1993: 155).

Engagement

Inspired by Bashabi's nostalgic dialogue with India's psychogeography and history, I set to work, resorting to myth and imaginary projection in order to flesh out my own poems. I delved into the unwritten unknown in an effort to preserve Bashabi's recollections of places dear to her, skimmed over possibilities of filling the gaps in my knowledge and understanding, attentive to details, I espoused her prosody and play in my responses. I expanded upon images or contracted them with irony. I embroidered incipient story lines or pulled out their threads. I stitched ink memorialising the work as though I knew the encounter was to remain imaginary and symbolic.

The stitching metaphor may come as a surprise, but I haven't told you that while engaging with Bashabi's poem I occasionally fingered a sari bought thirty-five years ago in the then city of Madras. It is made of printed textile in the style of Kalamkari and it bears the traces of fraying, cuts, and repairs. It also holds the imprint of a mythology I had once started to explore. References to this mythology infuse 'Apology to Kavia' and 'Gomanchala' where the text gestures beyond cultural barriers and their creator worries about acts of appropriation.

These aesthetic and ethical problems aside, I want to say that I approached the task of responding to Bashabi Fraser's poems quite literally: I wrote what may be called intuitive rejoinders to specific stanzas or lines that encapsulate what her poems ask. 'Apology to Kavia' takes its cue from the second stanza of 'Teesta and the Transforming Flood of 1968', 'Gomanchala' from the first line of 'Goa', and 'Himalayan Secrets: a mourner's riposte' from the first line of 'Himalayan Secrets'. My responses mimic Bashabi's punctuation and lay out on the page, except for the third poem written in couplets. The tone, mood, register, and rhythm vary.

For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. (Said 2000: 186)

Similarly, as I attempt to find stability in this new imaginary country where distant memories of India coalesce, real memories intrude despite myself. I know what it means to be poised between two psychogeographical realms, and the first two poems I wrote capture the competing demands of the symbolic and the imaginary. So does the third response, but here in hindsight I am surprised by what has crept in from the real. Let me briefly explain.

‘Himalayan Secrets: a mourner’s riposte’ takes its cue from the very first line of Bashabi’s original poem. It augurs as a landscape piece – an innocuous one at that as I don’t have any deep connection with India’s landscapes, except for the cliffs around Mamallapuram, where my former dare-devil self performed a few stunts with an artist whose life was tragically curtailed.

I am almost shocked by the tone of this riposte. It echoes some of my poems about Australia. The sheer alienation from the landscape I fail again and again to inhabit. It echoes the real buried deep down in memory: someone I loved from childhood dreamed of climbing Mount Everest, but fell to his death mountaineering in the Alps only weeks before setting out to Nepal.

My responses stray in more than one way, but I am reminded that throughout the history of literature ‘some of the ways works use setting go beyond the role of a mere literary device to raise questions about the landscapes we inhabit and our experiences of them’ (Jordan-Baker 2020: 11). This includes subjective and cultural engagement with place, which for poets entails working at the intersection of the imaginary and the symbolic while allowing for an incursion of the real. [1]

‘Teesta and the Transforming Flood of 1968’ by Bashabi Fraser

Where the Kanchenjanga lifts its
Proud peak, opening its ample arms
Wide to capture the majestic stride
Of the sun from the moment it disarms
The horizon, you churn out from the glacial
Chain that reflects the splendour of the range
Which becomes your impetus to court danger
As you break free to fulfil your destiny.

I have stood at the edge of Teesta Bazaar
Balancing my cup of cha, warily watching
Your seething green waters below,
As you warred with the Himalayan rocks, matching
Their resistance with your own.
I have leaned over Coronation Bridge
To send a wishing pebble down
To dive into your cavernous breach
And heard its whimpering refrain.

You were my girlhood river Teesta,
By whose echoing gorge at Sevoke
I have picnicked, where the vistas
Of ranges were witnesses to a bond forged
With youthful awe, that would soon be revoked.

I grew up along your strenuous length
Revelling in your heaving depths and strength
From the ruminating peace of Kalimpong's perch –
Before you leapt with intent and lurched
Towards Moinaguri and Jalpaiguri,
Those thriving towns where life's pace
Had known the grace of generous days.
But you had not a mother's dreams
To nurture, cherish, and sustain.
The Rangpo, Lachung, and Rangeet bring
Rich tributes to your widening plains
They fuel your ambitious zeal
That flouts all prayers and appeals.

I have seen how in one memorable year
You moved the heavens to tears
The retreating Monsoons were strained back
Pulled by their hair to feed your banks
The sky was afraid to clear for days
The incessant rain shared heaven's pain.
Your appetite could not be quenched
Till you had mercilessly drenched
The land over which you thrashed with glee
In destructive, vicious ecstasy.
While cities slept, your waters crept
Through prosperous streets
Whose dignity you sought to break.
Before your waters could retreat
You urged the placid Karala
To join your dance of dolour.

But the folks of gracious towns
In Moinaguri and Jalpaiguri
Were not willing to be drowned
And bow to you in defeat.
They swung back with alacrity
To contain you with gravity
And let your fearful beauty

Turn from awesome splendour
Transforming your ingenuity
To confirm your sanctity –
In your life-affirming qualities
Of compassion and candour
That today call forth
Our admiration and wonder.

'Apology to Kavia' by Dominique Hecq

I have committed an unspeakable
crime against you, Kavia: googled
Teesta. Drowned its roaring
music. Diluted its emerald churn
in glacial cascades at the end
of a long, dark winter.

I have indulged in literary
aesthetics and erotic solace
for penance as the humming
bee flits from flower to flower,
making veiled reproaches
to inconstant lovers.

I have summoned my shadow
to sing prayers and pen colophons
to poems embellished with silk
embroideries in shades of jade
meant as homage to the childhood
river that roams your memory.

I have turned your dreams
into a moat of green gems
that crowd your mouth,
your palace into a netherworld
mansion from which I substituted
your spirit with a mock child.

I could have erased evidence
of my ignorance and hubris,
anguish and desire to please,
but the white page is mordant—
resists the cloth-free hand

of bad faith as much as its nib.

Reflection

In Bashabi's poem, the speaker watches, interprets, engages, and claims her girlhood river Teesta with all its blessings, tragedies, and wonders. The poem asks that we enter into its lyric disclosure as we would cross a temple's threshold. I feel unequipped for this task. Afraid of committing some sacrilege I acknowledge my shortcomings and honour the poem's sense of wonder with references to myths, comparing the writing process with the craft of dying cloth.

'Goa' by Bashabi Fraser

It is my Bohemia
where a spring breeze blows in winter
making the palm fronds tremble with emotion;
where the sun does not burn
but shines with the caress of love;

where the sea awaits the expectant adventurer
and the shore stretches out to welcome her back;
where every hill holds promises
of curving arms to ensconce

and where, everywhere I turn
are the eyes, the smile, the arms of love
to curl, bask and build trust in
and live again.

'Gomanchala' by Dominique Hecq

It is my Gollywog's Cakewalk

where trees push new shoots and flowers in winter
making bees frisky and birds flashy
where the air is fragrant and the sun young
with honeyed promises

where the sea dances to the sound of the piano next door
the cooling rays of the moon
where the shore unfurls like a scroll
folds like that Kalamkari cloth
where odours, colours, forms and sounds curl

bind
vault

where everywhere one turns words change
shape and sense as I will do with you

to live.

Reflection

‘Goa’ is a dance poem. It is playful and exuberant. It celebrates life. It wants the reader to join in the dance. And so I join in. ‘Gomanchala’ is a *pas de deux* that wants to honour a setting, a feeling, and a will to live. It transposes the subjective love element of ‘Goa’ onto the cultural plane by marrying western and Indian traditions.

‘Himalayan Secrets’ by Bashabi Fraser

This is cloud country.
They drift dreamily
They sprawl lazily
They shift to conceal
They lift to reveal
Vistas of virgin sprawl
Of range on range
Growing with green
Abandon in the silence
Of heaven’s sanction.
As darkness invades
With a thud once
The sun like an ancient
Discus has spun behind
The regal ridges
A belief descends
That one is alone
In this majestic sweep
Of bold beauty,
Impenetrable and old.

Till out of the whisperless
Stillness a light looms
And then another
And another, in succession
Like a stringless

Necklace on the hill
In front and beyond
In a wordless conversation
Of far-flung habitations
Caressing the crests.

'Himalayan Secrets: a mourner's riposte' by Dominique Hecq

This is rock hard country
Ridge lip drop cartography

Range on range disarrange
Stones steps breath pulse silence

The dark raids blood chambers
You are earth's body

Pulled to the clouds that crush
The idea of sunshine

Corpse hankering after heights
You will forever daydream

Drift in cloud country
Settle on crests with souls

Call all the nearly dead
Crawling into crevices

This is hard rock country
Fringe lip drop cartography

Range on range deranged
Stoned steps breath pulse silence

Reflection

Like the Teesta piece, 'Himalayan Secrets' asks that I enter with care its lyric sphere. It asks me to look at the sky through the eyes of another. But I refuse. All I can see is the mutinous mountain. I want to shatter it with staccato rhythm. I compose a brutal mourning poem. It is a radical encounter with the Other. The poem professes my impotence. It closes in on itself. Is foreclosed.

Concluding thoughts

The project demonstrates the intuitive aspect of responding to another poet's work and the thwarted work of transference in this particular case. Though the writing operates at the intersection of the imaginary and the symbolic, incursions of the real occur, disturbing the neat divide between subjective encounter and cultural engagement.

Notes

1. The real, symbolic, and imaginary are to be understood in a Lacanian lexicon. See in particular: J Lacan 2005 *Le Séminaire, Livre XXIII* (1975), *Le Sinthome*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller (Seuil, Paris).

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