

COMMENTARY

Sharma, Arushi; Debnath, Aishe; Karne, Manisha; Kumar, Satishchandra; Kharat, Rajesh (Ed.) 2023.

Peace through Poetry. An Ethnographic Journey into Peace.

Foreword by: Arundhati Subramaniam.

New Delhi/ Kathmandu: Adroit Publishers. Pages 154. INR 699.

Chandrika Kumar

Assistant Professor (On Leave)

Department of German Studies, School of Languages, Doon University, Dehradun

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar International Research Centre and the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Mumbai have jointly brought out an extremely fascinating poetic anthology on 'Peace'. This volume contains an insightful foreword by the acclaimed poet and Sahitya Academy (India's Academy of Letters) Awardee, Ms. Arundhati Subramaniam along with 91 poems by contributors from various parts of India and abroad. Only four letters of the alphabet i.e. I, Q, T & Z, are not represented when it comes to the names of the contributors. The poets represented in this volume are not just of various age groups, but also from various walks of life. The youngest contributor is a teenager who was just 16 at the time of the publication of this volume. Most of the contributors have (had) an affiliation with the University of Mumbai. While a lot of young students and teachers as budding poets have expressed their views on the notion of 'Peace', there are some highly experienced people with a background in academia, civil service, corporate management and non-government organizations who have contributed to this volume. Thus, so many voices are contained in this volume which makes it an extremely diverse as well as rich read on a perennially relevant theme to which everyone can connect across the segments of time and space.

Peace does not mean the same for everyone as the understanding of peace differs from person to person. If we go on to articulate what peace means for us, we would come up with various expressions, which means that peace has various dimensions which have the potential even to cohere the binary oppositions of

internal-external, subjective-objective, physical-metaphysical. Furthermore, 'Peace' has a cultural, political, religious, social, spiritual, psychological, theological and philosophical side. In all these various notions of peace, there is also an intrinsic and universal element, yet it is not so easy to narrow down all the commonalities that go hand in hand with the various notions of peace. A poetic anthology on 'Peace' is therefore a laudable effort on the part of the University of Mumbai to bring the much-needed discussion on 'Peace' to the forefront at a time that is marred by violent conflicts and agonizing controversies.

There is a very close link between peace and sustainability. Even the United Nations lays a lot of emphasis on fostering peace and sustainable development. In an article on this topic in the *UN Chronicle* (2015), Lamberto Zannier, the Secretary General of the OSCE opines that peace is a major prerequisite to sustainable development. He asserts that sustainable development in return also provides for peaceful societies. It is therefore very important that we resort to peaceful means to overcome conflict and differences; that alone can lead to sustainable changes in the given world order. An international advocate of education for sustainable development is also represented in this volume who questions, rather wonders if peace is "just a Gandhian Notion" (47). His poems call for close reading and introspection as he takes the readers through the notions of 'greed' and 'trust' while invoking global and, at the same time, local issues. We come across another advocate of peace in this volume who scripts: "Let us Wage Peace against those who Wage War/ And turn our Earth into a Peace Star!" (14) Yet another poet who happens to be also an editor of this volume, calls for restoring 'lost hope' and sowing 'the seeds of new order'. She says 'even if separated by borders', we can be 'united by empathy' in our 'Pursuit of Peace'. (17)

While giving a brief historical account of some of the major peace initiatives and their preceding challenges, a poem in this volume very interestingly contextualises the paradox and polemics of the colour white: "In a world, where white colour stands for peace, / Whites are only disturbing the harmony of society" (50). While discovering peace, yet another poet questions the symbolism attached to peace and goes on to articulate that: "Peace resembled by doves, / Noise by pigeons/ Neither doves nor pigeons/ Are Aware of this symbolisms" (74). In this way, this anthology is a beautiful amalgamation of the various questions and answers,

problems and solutions that have been going around the notion of 'Peace' in our times.

Since language finds one of its most beautiful expressions in poetry, it is inevitable that poetic tropes and rhetoric means also find a place for themselves in this volume. Poetry as a form of linguistic art is also open to new experiments and appropriations, thus in the age of digital technology which has witnessed the establishment of customer care across the world, we come across a very interesting poem entitled "World Peace Customer Care" in this anthology. It goes without saying that after reading this parody on customer care and world peace, one can't help but laugh. Thus, a certain amount of amusement has also been cared for by this anthology which otherwise deals with a highly serious subject matter that can also be 'evasive' and 'delicate' and 'fragile'. A highly experienced poet in this volume makes 'Peace' her dialogue partner and enters into a conversation with 'Peace' and says: "Few Blows of Ego, Power, and Greed and in Abyss you stumble down." (100)

Among the many personalities who spent their whole life in the pursuit of peace, Gautama Buddha is perhaps indisputably at the top. A poet in this anthology enters into a conversation with Buddha and juxtaposes the here-there binary to find out if peace at all prevails where Buddha finds himself because the place, i.e., here, in this world, where he gave lessons on peace, it is very difficult to find. The poet laments and asks: "Gautama, / Here, your place is being shattered/ into pieces." [...] "How is it there, / Gautama, / How is it there?" (114-115)

As we read through this anthology, we come across a clue shared by the youngest poet of this volume, that peace is 'immersed' within us. This approach is also in line with what Eberhard Schockenhoff (2018) has expressed in terms of the choices an individual always has between peace and violence. For our poet here "Peace is the path to uniting with the world and eternal divinity; / If peace is induced in us from birth, it is vain to sign a treaty." (128) Some poems play with the metaphor of peace, thus we come across a poem that suggests that "Peace is the flower that speaks" (139). Flowers, as we know, are delicate and go through

various phases in their lifecycle. Hence, if we care to maintain and preserve the beautiful flower, it costs a lot of effort, yet at one point in time it is bound to fade away. This anthology introduces the readers to a poet who has introduced the 'social-emotional curriculum' in the schools in the post-pandemic world. We also come across a poem that suggests how "Peace and Happiness" (144-145) are closely linked together, yet the assumptions that people generally make in this regard about other people who are happy and at peace are discussed in this poem. Towards the end of this volume also, we have a highly experimental poem that insightfully capitalises on peace. The last poem of this anthology appeals to giving peace a chance. While reading, one would nonetheless see how amazingly this poem rhymes; it is as if poetic beauty were on display.

This assessment is true for the whole volume. The language is comprehensible and there is no display of jargon as such. The language of poetry comes from the heart and can connect to everyone. Moreover, the theme of this volume is such that it does not restrict itself to any specific kind of readership, thus it is open to a general readership. Anyone who cares for peace and wants to contribute to this end can benefit from this volume. What remains wanting, is an all-encompassing take on peace, nevertheless, such an endeavour in itself is indeed unattainable. Peace is not a means to an end; it is a process that shows the way and this anthology tries to do the same.

