

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Debasish Lahiri, *No Waiting like Departure* (Authors Press, 2016)

‘Departure is a reaching out... a hope that it is worth while waiting to arrive at the threshold of another’s life’. (10)

As my pen hovers above a page already multiply marked by words written and erased, I contemplate writing that *No Waiting Like Departure* is a book of poems about travel. It would not be a false statement, for this collection – the second from acclaimed Bengali writer and university lecturer Debasish Lahiri – certainly features many poems based on the poet’s travels. Indeed, the book’s contents are, like a careful map or even itinerary, neatly bordered into six distinct sections, each encompassing a particular place, journey or leg thereof. Placed in sequence, these sections, like chapters, suggest an overall narrative – one that transports readers through the writer’s experiences of Manchester, Delhi, Golapur, Shimla, Chennai, the Andamans and Lahiri’s hometown, Kolkata, among other fascinating settings. This structure makes the collection readable as an autobiographical verse novel or poetic travel diary – a textual expedition oscillating between the familiar and strange towards deepened insight.

Yet to read the book in this way alone would be to miss the many deeper complexities, the elusive treats of a collection that may also be read in many other ways. Suggestions of these alternative readings ripple deliciously through Lahiri’s introduction to the collection – a critical reflection that, with its vivid metaphors and verbal musicality, may itself be considered prose poetry, and which I deem a valuable read in its own right for anyone interested in time, place, philosophy and transformation as manifest in and through poetry. Lahiri remarks that his book, though on one hand describable as ‘poetry about place’, is perhaps more accurately understandable as a ‘poetry of longing’ (13) – of waiting, wanting, searching and desire, of the loss that is discovery, the desolation on which depends hope. With reference to the Greek notion of the *nostos* – a term Homer used in *The Odyssey* to signify both journey and destination – Lahiri notes the paradoxical inseparability of departure, arrival and waiting, emphasising that the ‘point’ of his poems is ‘the turn to return, not return itself’, and reflecting on time as ‘the promise of a return’, yet something that simultaneously seems always from the start irretrievably ‘lost, like an offering poured in the dust’ (13).

Lahiri’s introduction signals the necessity of reading *No Waiting Like Departure* in ways that unravel and exceed too-easy tendencies towards narrative linearity and coherence – tendencies that are in western cultures largely dominant, and at times domineering.¹ Each poem needs to be treated as a complex suite of concurrent departures and arrivals in its own right, upon which each new reading layers still more journeys, more readings, more scope for forging connections across and beyond the lines, stanzas and sections of a book that seems to be, on every additional read, ever more an invitation to stray from the logical-yet-limiting sequential order of its contents. But this is no slight against the order itself: in this case, it is the limit that suggests its own excess; the sequence or itinerary is what makes it thinkable to forego the itinerary – to forge interpretive departures from the immediately obvious ways of broaching Lahiri’s poems, and thus to accept implicit invitations towards off-road reading, towards the

¹ My claim about the dominant and domineering nature of narrative in western cultures refers to issues too complex to accommodate within this brief review. However, readers wishing to contextualise the claim may consult Galen Strawson, ‘Against Narrativity,’ *Ratio* 17.4 (2004) 428-452.

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enactment of one's own textual adventures in and through the metaphysical as well as cultural settings and scenarios that Lahiri's words weave. It is, after all, possible to travel without leaving one's armchair, as the poet's dedication of the book to his father meekly notes.

Broaching *No Waiting Like Departure* in non-linear and non-narrative terms generates possibilities for connections and return-journeys of a broadly Deleuzian, rhizomatic nature. For me, these connections and returns (or turns to return) were most strongly suggested and compelled through the book's many shifting reiterations of images, ideas and motifs – notably history, memory, loneliness, connection and juxtaposition of the monstrous with the sublime as two things so often embodied within the one same place, moment or experience. For instance, upon finding themselves in

The old chameleon quarters of the fishermen
Where sun-beaten and dry the salt
Of the blue waves
Hide the outrage of history
Like a monster, (103)

a reader may be drawn back to the book's previous section, in which the author, moving 'onwards', makes a 'return' to Kolkata:

Pasted on the back
Of a mottled green canvas:
A beautiful country
Estranged by memories ...
An ugly city
Endeared by its nightmares ...
The way to verse ... (93)

This can in turn transport the reader again to the strained departure lounges of the book's opening 'Manchester' suite, where

Random desires for action
Make me think of people,
People without stories
Without the characters
Between the spines of their book
Opened with every day's waking. (28)

These lines and images exemplify the subtle-yet-powerful ways in which the book's poems and sections link with and play off one another. They are also characteristic of the condensed language, heightened imagery, symbolic depth, lyrical music and other rare joys offered upon every page, in every poem of this accomplished collection.

I can therefore offer nought but praise for *No Waiting Like Departure*. Though the multitudinous reading possibilities it invites, this book allows readers to connect with and learn from diverse cultures and locations in experiential and engaged, as opposed to safely distanced or hypothetical ways. Lahiri's poetry reminds us that reading, writing, speech and other acts of language are themselves modes of departure through which one may arrive in many surprising,

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undreamed places. Furthermore, and as Lahiri's poems illustrate, such arrivals always entail possibilities for new departures – push us to thresholds upon which to meet with others, including our new selves, thresholds through which we may in moments of desolation rediscover hope, rediscover life. For even in the face of 'edgeless darkness', Lahiri's poetry shimmers,

Like a noun
On the Sun's palette
Waiting to colour
A wider light. (122)

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