



Book Review

Jerry Pinto, *I Want a Poem and Other Poems*. Speaking Tiger Books, 2021. pages 78, Rs.299/,

Dr. Manika Arora

Jerry Pinto, in an interview, has claimed that, in its production and dissemination, literature is a phenomenon of the city. It holds true for his literature as the interior geography and the cultural fabric of Mumbai, a city he has been living in and working for many years, surfaces frequently in his work. From his biographies of Helen and Leela Naidu and his writings on Bollywood to his edited volume, *Bombay, Meri Jaan*, there is a lot of Bombay in his works. However, the city does not emerge as a monolithic and static locale in these works but as a cosmopolitan world that is constantly shifting and is, intrinsically, a city of dreams. In addition to its urbanscape, Bombay in its slums also unfolds itself in his translation of Daya Panwar's *Baluta*. Pinto's fascination with Bombay continues even in his second poetic collection, *I Want a Poem and Other Poems*. It is on the campus of Elphinstone college, Mumbai that the poet steps down the past and is reminded of the "First love intoxicated in a chemistry class...[and the] organic equation of thigh against thigh" (Pinto 13). In fact, Pinto dedicates his new collection to the group of 'Bombay poets'-- Nissim, Adil, Arun and Eunice. It was in Bombay that the modernism in Indian English poetry began with Nissim Ezekiel's poetry in the 1950s and '60s. Ever since, for the poets like Arun Koltakar, Eunice D'Souza, Adil Jussawalla, A. K. Mehrotra, Gieve

Patel and others, Bombay has proved to be a fertile ground for poetry. The present collection's dedication to these poets works as a creative context to Pinto's own poetry and situates him in the literary circle of Bombay poets. His is a voice that resonates along with these poets and yet remains uniquely individual.

The poems in the present collection, in responding to the Bombay tradition invoked in the dedication, extend the tradition further. There are poems about love, loss, leaving, longing, grief, healing and hope. The poems are succinct and crisp with no bargain in their rigour and intensity. Many of these poems are conversational in their mode as if the translator Pinto translates the speaking voice into the writing voice, whereas in the other poems, the poet Pinto ruminates on the "...memories of suddenness and curves..." (Pinto 11). Poetry, for Pinto, is an asylum as declared in his first collection *Asylum and Other Poems* (2003). It is an act wherein he unveils himself to sheer nakedness. It is a nest that contains his vulnerabilities, his secrets and "...broken stories..." (Pinto 50). It is a realm of free play where the pursuit for the resolution is suspended. Most of his poems are spontaneous, candid, blatant and deny closure. This continuation of his poetic process spills over the pages of his present collection. In a substantially metapoetic endeavour, *I Want a Poem and Other Poems* muses over the poetic art, its making, functionality, its expectations from its readers, as well as, the danger involved in a poet's search for truth. The title poem announces the poet's desire for a poem much like a Russian circus that has been 'trained' to leap, shimmer, spangle and exult like no ordinary poem can. By alluding to the training of a poem, the poet emphasises the process of rigorous editing that is central to his poetic credo. It can also be noted that Pinto's most accomplished work, the

novel *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012) was published after editing of more than two decades. It is, therefore, in the antics of a trained poem that a big-eyed lonely child seeks escapade.

Extending the metaphor of beloved to his poetry, the poet's process of writing poetry comes alive as a romance with his poems in "Night Lines". Brimming with an implied eroticism, the poem narrates the poet's liaison with his poem. The making of a poem is also an act of love that carries along with it the baggage of expectations, disappointment, satisfaction and justification. Much like love, it is also made in bed. As the narrator dusts his bed, the reader listens to the "...abstract nouns/ fall tinkling ...to the ground" (Pinto 65). The poem like the act reaches its climax as he watches it "...curl[ed] up between my [his] pillow and the wall" (Pinto 66).

Now that poems are born they anticipate being read fondly and remembered heartedly. Giving the agency to the poems, "My Poems" enumerates their expectations. Each artwork desires a patron or spectator, likewise, the poems with their homing instinct wish to reach out to their reader. They demand to be memorised. They want prizes, and desire to be on syllabi and curricula. The poems want to be translated into multiple languages. In a much-romanticised manner, they fancy an "... exclusion from the canon" only to be dramatically recovered later "... by/Pound, Eliot or Rushdie" (Pinto 47). Continuing with its self-reflexive tone, the poems recognize themselves as dangerous. Without the mask of fleshly lies, his "Skeleton poem rides in night terror..." (Pinto 43). There, of course, is great peril in writing the truth in these oppressive times as the "...poems are wanted by Interpol...[and] are tracked by the FBI" (Pinto 48). Pinto alludes to the control of the state over artistic expression. In this regard, the poem

underlines the autonomy of art as it is separated from its artist. The poem ends with a crucial disengagement of the poet from his poems as he declares “Thank God I am not like my poems” (Pinto 48).

Extending this metapoetic contemplation from the process of artistic production to its dissemination, the poem “Our Trade” points out the labyrinthine relationship between art and the market. Contrasting the two worlds, the poem remembers a time when the poets were stars and “... were all they [society] needed” (Pinto 23) but “...the reinvention business is a little crowded these days” (Pinto 23). It is a poet who fertilises the soil for the world, but now the words have lost their magic as they “...pour in a sludgy militant flood out of every profligate mouth...” (Pinto 23). Pertaining to the commercialisation of poetry in this market of words, the only piece of advice the narrator has for his fellow poets is to run.

It is only the rapacious venture that the poet warns his peers against, not to abandon poetry or wiggle it out of worldly affairs. In fact, his own poems are significantly located in his times and are marked by contemporariness. It is unlikely for a book published in 2021 to not reflect upon the pandemic that we are going through. Covid-19 and its aftermath have changed the way we perceive ourselves, as well as, the world. It has also introduced a new idiom for us. The book closes with some “Learning from the Lockdown”. As the whole world shrunk into the private space of the house, the poet excavates the thinginess of the mundane and transposes it to a poetic realm. As he looks at the fans that need cleaning, he is amused by the obstinacy of the dust settled there as “...dust persists/ dust gathers/ It sticks together/ Dust hangs on” (Pinto 76). The subsequent image of a chain of

ants chasing down the food from here and there is a reminder for the poet about the search that must go on.

On the whole, Pinto's poems predominantly invoke Bombay poetic tradition but are not confined to it. Unpretentiousness, playfulness, and self-referentiality in his poems are the seeds whose sprouting will significantly expand this living tradition as the poet rightly claims "My poems are seeds planted in your head; they'll sprout/ when you're dead" (Pinto 48).