

poetry Poetry Born in Grief

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by N Kamala

South Asian Love Poetry
Edited by S K Sareen & Kapil Kapoor
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IN THIS INTERESTING ATTEMPT SK Sareen and Kapil Kapoor have brought together poems originally written in English as well as in translation, from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Fiji, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore, and Sri Lanka. Though the term "South Asian" may be questionable, the editors' argument is that these countries display "an evident cultural unity" and have a shared past of "artistic and intellectual movements and norms". The editors argue that these countries have also shared "cultural-intellectual languages and theories" and assert that a "shared code of constitution of meaning and of expression, common dominant genres, similar themes and similarity of attitudes" make these countries form "A single literary cultural unit". This collection of love poems is an attempt to demonstrate this unity. It must be noted that the editors have selected poems written in the 1970s and after except in the case of Nepal to underline the contemporaneity of their position.

Marghana Sharq is the only Afghan poet in this volume and this young poet writing during the troubled days of her troubled country quite understandably regards "Dreams of life/Dreams of love/Dreams of joy", as dreams that have failed ("In My Lonely Room"). Her room is lonely, growing up painful, and her heart elsewhere. All she can hope for is that "a caravan will take her/Away from the desert"; that "the caravan of death will fetch her/To release her from eternal captivity" ("Caravan"). This sense of loss almost

sets the tone for the rest of the poems in the anthology many of which speak of separation — from childhood, from a loved one, from a land — and are tinged with sorrow. The editors point out that "in the poetry of this region karuna rasa predominates" and recall what Valmiki had said — "poetry is born in grief".

Bangladeshi love poetry has eleven poet representatives in this volume (two of whom write originally in Bengali). The first poem in this section happens to be a translation (Nasir Ahmed's "Only She Knows") and a not so successful one though a subcontinental reader will understand what the poet means when he says of the distant (in every sense of the term) lover that "Though she stays far away/She's still the nearest of all." One does wonder why this poem in its present version has been included in the anthology but perhaps this should be discussed later. A subcontinental reader will also smile but with irritation at Alauddin Al Azad's "Still-life" which opens with the lines "Do you remember O Lovely, that moment of my first kissing? Do you remember still that dacoity at the translucent noon?" (This is not a translation!) Even this dacoit has lost his love and even in retrospect can only dream of meeting doom headlong. Shireen Kazi carries on the mourning — "My tears must fall like Bakul flower/The farther you go, the nearer I find you" ("The Bakul Flowers") and head above heels in love (literally and metaphorically!) she sings "Were you the moon, my love/And I a star/Always to climb above/To where you are!" ("Aspirations").

Razia Khan too writes of love impossible but obstinate — "I buried you I thought past resurgence/in books and cold looks — in prudence" ("I Buried You") in a poem that works well. Halima Khatun in her surrealistic poem "Moon Dream" declares "My heart missed a bulb/Which could withstand love/And shot into a red dahlia." Buddha, Biddapati, and Hemingway figure in this. Hal-

ima's references are refreshingly eclectic — Jesus Christ, Aladin, Radha, Noah, Bodhidharma, Hasa "I followed you through the ages" laments Shama Naaz but "you do not know/and all is in vain." ("I Followed You Through the Ages"). Shamsur Rahman in his translated poem sees sorrow everywhere, even "in the soft hidden language of my heart" ("Sorrow"). He declares to his love that "Trying to make you happy/I only make myself unhappy" ("Test"). And Lita Samad brings the Pakistani section to a close with a poem of disenchantment with love ("The River").

Of the two Fijian poets in the anthology, Sudesh Mishra is represented by poems that seem to have strayed in from elsewhere. However one is glad that they did so for they introduce a good poet to us. The other poet Cecil Rajendra has only one poem here "First and Secondhand Ladies" which again hardly fits in with the theme of this anthology however broadly the editors may define it.

There are thirteen poets in the Indian section and they include K N Daruwala (one poem), Kamala Das (three), Gauri Deshpande (one), P Lal (three), R. Parthasarathy (two), Saleem Peeradina (one), A K Ramanujan (one), and Vikram Seth (one), G Sankara Kurup (one) from Malayalam, and DV Krishan Sastri (one) from Telugu representing bhasha poetry. The other Indo-English poets included being Mahasweta Baxipatra (six), Gitanjali (four), and Adarsh Misra (three). Vikram Seth's poem "Last Night" is a translation from the Urdu of Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

Mahasweta Baxipatra writes of the first stirrings of love, the fears and the desires — "My love lies in the folds of silence/On the frills of inhibition" ("Expression"). Almost ironically and appositely her poems are followed by KN Daruwala's "Love among the Pines", a surprising poem in this so far collection of distant romance with only metaphorical "The Grail Met the Sword" by Halima Khatun for company. Ka-

mala Das follows with "Ghanashyam" a "A Wound on My Side", and "Herons". She writes of the benumbing husband, the necessary, renewable, but hurtful lover, and the search for Love and God. Gauri Deshpande celebrates the constant surprise, pleasure, and renewal of love in her "Summer Sequence": "Who hasn't heard the raucous/cuckoo, irritating, cawing his way/through all the summer days/and yet felt the newness of his wooing?"

It is good to see P Lal back in an anthology and his "Radha Waits for Krishna" obviously selects itself. R Parthasarathy as usual brings order, mixes metaphors and makes sense — "Now, only the thought of you/(live coals I blow on)/ burns distance to a stub." ("Thought") Saleem Peeradina regrets missing an opportunity in his "To a Wife Not My Own" a poem of nuances. If A K Ramanujan had to be represented by only one poem, why "A River"? This is a surprising choice. Adarsh Misra, a good choice, has three poems here, one of which "Puri Beach" has again strayed in. Both of Misra's other poems work well. G Sankara Kurup's "Revelation" is a poem of religious ecstasy and surprisingly seems out of place in this collection. After all the editors do claim that this anthology contains "poems of personal experience in terms of love for the woman or love for God." By "the woman" they probably mean "the human", but there is very little poetry here written to express "Love for God."

The three Nepalese poets in the anthology — Madhav Prasad Ghimire, Bhimdershan Roka, and Tedarman "Vyathir" seem to write from another era in their finely crafted poems. All the poems are in translation. Nature, Love, and God (dess) come together as only they can in such beautiful countryside as Nepal has.

All the eight Pakistani poets in this volume write in English. The first, Ikram Azam, has two very light weight poems. Zulfiqar Ghose has two powerful poems, the first of which is "The Loss of

India". This is an intense poem about the Partition and loss of innocence. To quote a few lines: "When the bullets hit him, his body was cut/into the bars of a jail he had never left/his stomach shrivelled into another hunger fast." (These are lines about who else but Mahatma Gandhi.) The poem ends with a Bombay boy in Pakistan: "The boy cushioned his heart in the moss/of withdrawal for his India and his youth were lost". His other poems "The Mystique of Roots" has some fine lines: "The long arm of the sun wipes India's brow" but is again about a feeling of loss, of lack of fulfillment.

Inamul Haq has two poems which again spotlight the lonely lover, and is the second lonely lover who dare not ...! Hina, in "Loneliness", thinks of her absent lover and consoles herself remembering "the embrace of youth/mis-spent, but lived." Taufiq Rawat declares that "The time to love/is when the heart says so". ("The Time to Love") Rawat's poems show glimpses of humour. His "Monkeys at Hardwar", again a surprising choice for this anthology, is a poem worth reading. In "At My Mother's Grave" he says: "To all who still live in the house/you are a vague absence, a photograph/on the mantelpiece, to be looked at/in passing". This is a touching poem. Rawat also has a long poem called "Mr Nachiketa" which serves to remind one of the shared cultural roots of the subcontinent.

Seventeen poets represent Singapore — eight of whom are translated from Chinese, two from Malay, and three from Tamil, the rest writing in English. This section to a certain degree interrogates the editors' belief that a certain unity marks the entire region that they have demarcated. But the editors themselves point out in the introduction, Singaporean poetry "is marked by an impersonality of treatment". There is as they go on to say "a greater degree of intellectuality" in these poems, and one misses the immediacy which marks the rest of the poetry in this collection.

Robert Yeo's English poem, "Christian Cemetery" is to his grandmother: "My Granny, though Catholic, was cremated/according to her wish. She knew/room is our affection was all/the space she needed."

The Sri Lankan poets (fine, all of them write in English) have poems of nostalgia selected for this anthology. Patrick Fernando's "Boat Song" and Yasmine Gooneratne's "Touch Me Not" fit in effortlessly into the genre of love poetry but not so Anne Kanasinghe's "The Fiddler of Kollupitiyo". There is yearning for a certain repose in Lak-dasa Wikramasinha's "In Ancient Kotmale", a certain need to be part of nature. This poem rounds off the volume, a volume which seeks to redefine the nation of love poetry.

S K Sareen and Kapil Kapoor have definitely to be congratulated for attempting this task. It is refreshing to see an attempt at redefining the concept of "love poetry" but the anthology very often seems to lose focus altogether. Another problem is the use of translated poem in the anthology. There seems to be no reason why any translations have been included. They do not offer a counterweight and are too few in number in any case. As regards the selection of poems — the above points seem to indicate that the editors seem to have encountered difficulty in locating texts and have used whatever was made available to them. This could be the reason why a whole section, the Nepalese, is from a different time period from the rest of the anthology. One final criticism: an anthology of this nature which introduces new poets from various countries should have notes on the poets included. But criticism of this nature is only to note the pinpricks in an otherwise praiseworthy attempt.

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monologue

Ode to My Alma Mater

I am pensive tonight. An ugly barbarous incident between a strutting student leader and a powerless female student of my department has finally pushed me to the edge. How long, my brain screams silently, how long, dear God, how long will this go on? How long will we remain hostages and victims of anarchy and assault and corruption and deceit?

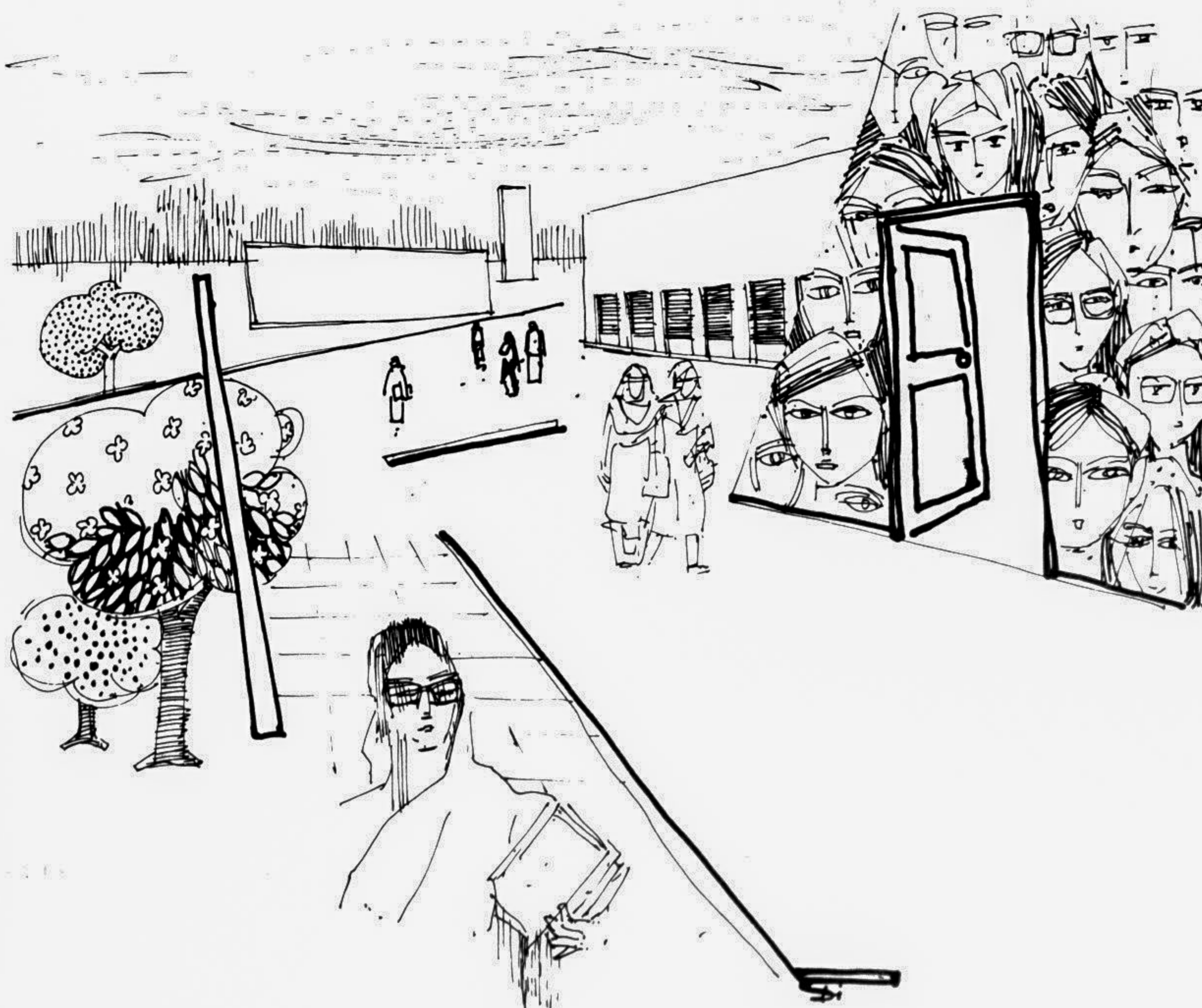
by Rebecca Haque

FOR A LONG TIME NOW, MY identity as a strongly vocal and sometimes (of necessity) belligerent Dhakaites has invisibly and inexorably melded with my identity as a graduate of Dhaka University. Tonight, after having served my beloved alma mater with years of honest toil, I sit back and slowly count my profits on the tips of the fingers of my right hand.

I am pensive tonight. An ugly barbarous incident between a strutting student leader and a powerless female student of my department has finally pushed me to the edge. How long, my brain screams silently, how long, dear God; how long will this go on? How long will we remain hostages and victims of anarchy and assault and corruption and deceit? How long, dear dear God, will our minds be bludgeoned into much by fear, by foreboding, by intimidation? Sadly, I have no answer. Like my own female student. I too am powerless. Can my words — the tools of my trade and my only weapon of defense and survival — can my words alone illuminate my sorrow and rage and rain fire and hail and brimstone on the perverted puny minds that are polluting the lovely campus grounds of my alma mater? I have little hope — time and time again, there has been no adequate punishment to fit the crime. In a bizarre inversion of logic and reason, perpetrators lordly traverse the grounds of the university, while their innocent victims seek nooks and crannies to hide their too vulnerable flesh. My words, too, I guess, will scatter in the four winds and turn to dust and crumble into nothingness — like the so many priceless books crumbling silently to dust in the crowded, neglected shelves of the Dhaka University library.

Days and months have I spent in that library, and as an enthralled undergraduate student I have sometimes been allowed by a generous librarian to quietly sneak into the large back rooms of stacks and stacks of books, and I have lovingly wandered through alien floors and gazed at thick old bound volumes of Anthropology and Psychology and have taken quick detours into Philosophy and Sociology, before coming back to my legitimate terrain — Literature. Some of us now teaching in my department (and in a few other departments of this university and other distant universities of the world) began our journey together. Classmates and friends and lovers, we spent hours of fun-filled time writing copious notes on reams of reams of paper in that time before the age of the xerox machine. Learning was fun, being together was fun, and my university was the best in the world for me. I lived the life I was meant to live — I learned and loved and lost and loved again. I became a woman. Later, I became a teacher as well.

It has not been easy, being a teacher of this University. Pathetically declining academic standards have been weeping many a time, and in class I have sustained myself by seeking out inspiration in the few glowing faces with whom I would do a delightful dance of dazzling eye-contact as I spoke, and our minds joined in a symphony of lucid comprehension. Do I teach? No, I share! I love these select few; they have the facility, they have the insight — and they speak my language. They are my children. Today, if I have achieved a small success in bestowing upon them a measure of my own veneration for art and have planted in their receptive intuitive minds a deep respect for the enduring values of courage and integrity, it is because I too had teachers who gently led me to develop my own moral vision. I learned from good teachers whose affection for me has been my succour in



my years of pain and misfortune, and my loyalty towards them is fierce and unquestionable. Bad teachers I avoided like the plague — and still do!

My attitude towards my students grows more protective, even maternal as I grow older. The light of intelligence shines forth from their eyes and I want to embrace them and give them more, do more for them. So much potential only asking for the right kind of guidance, the deservedly adequate support, the truly ethical choice. But, everyday, I feel gagged and bound — how shall I fulfil my responsibility when I cannot even give them a working light bulb during evening examination hours and I can feel bitter saliva on my tongue as I invigilate scores of bent heads straining to see their own handwriting in the smoky grey dark room.

In a poignant short story, Hemingway once cried out for "a clean well-lighted place", and, today, I do too. Oh, my alma mater, when will I see clear white walls a blooming lawns and garbage-free paths and quiet zones around classrooms where the blaring cacophony of innumerable public and private vehicles no longer drown out human voices? The Hemingwayesque struggle is against Nada, against chaos, nothingness, madness. This must our struggle too, my alma mater, if we are to survive with honour. Posterity awaits! Let us open our closets — men and women alike — and take out our brooms and sweep away the rubbish so that the campus evolves into our own precious "well-lighted place" which enlightened, liberated minds from all over the world consider it a privilege to visit and perhaps stay for a few years of invaluable higher education.

Dear God, shall this come to pass, ever?

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