

BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

Kolkata, unplugged

Review of Mitali Chakravarty’s ‘From Calcutta to Kolkata: A City of Dreams: Poems’ (Hawakal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2025)

AKSHAYA KUMAR

Not many cities can claim to inherit a thickly layered palimpsestic past, which Kolkata has been a witness to over the last 300 years. As the city grows from a tiny geography of three villages, into a megapolis of size and splendour, it acquires a visceral sensibility that seeps into the bloodstream of its residents who, even as they migrate, continue to feel it in their pulses. Once the space turns into an abiding tophophilic sentiment, it excites the sensitive residents to break into poetry—poetry of self and space—with one seamlessly coalescing into the other. Writing the city becomes an act of self-witnessing, an inward journey into one’s own emotional make-up.

Mitali Chakravarty’s latest collection of poems, *From Calcutta to Kolkata: A City of Dreams*, is not an ordinary chronicle of a city, it is a ‘sthalpuran’—a sustained act of cultural cartography, never attempted before. Writing more than 75 poems on a city that is perpetually on the move,

A city which has been infamously described by a range of writers as “a dying city”, “a widow in the white sari”, “a slow boiled sewer”, or as “a Great Black Hole” of urban India, is reclaimed by the poet as a city “that glows with humanity’s overflow, never overcrowding”. It is with such redeeming equipoise that the poet rediscovers the city and its people—known for their “certain sense of humour/ that stays, acerbic yet friendly”. The readers of the poems feel the pulse of the city as they navigate along with the poet.

literally moulting its skin every season, or renewing its feminine energy every Durga Puja cycle, is an act of immersive plunge that redeems both the city and the poet in reciprocal ways.

The poems in the collection are not easy panegyrics, nor are they plaintive requiems. Each poem is a snippet of the city—its animating inner recesses, its informal convivial



PHOTOS/DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

addas, its monuments of unaging intellect—traversed, and felt first-hand. The poet travels through the city as much as the city travels through the poet. Local anecdotes, hearsays, micro-histories, literary asides, street murmurs, and familial whispers—all that is usually filtered out of standard, chronicles as unreliable and turns into ready material for poetry which is both persuasive and compelling. The love lore of heroic Job Charnock with his widowed bride Maria—a Rajput princess rescued from a funeral pyre—recounted in a Jatra performance during a festive night is an occasion enough for Chakravarty to lapse into a poetic ecstasy. Forgoing toxic debates of Orientalism, she approaches the city as a sensuous woman that lures, and is lured. In a telescopic swoop, the poet writes, “Love sprouted the City of Joy”, connecting Charnock’s legend with Dominique Lapierre’s 1985 catchy description of Kolkata as the ‘City of Joy’.

Bornaroundromance,Chakravarty’s Calcutta grows to acquire its own palpable textuality, its semantic surplus, and its enabling ambivalences that defy explanations: “Google map gets lost/ in narrow by-lanes” (from “Dumdum”). While the garden of

Jorasanko—Tagore’s ancestral home—is abuzz with the knotty stories of Bhanu and Kadambari; the lanes on way to this bastion of the ‘bhadralok’ bear testimony to “neglected lives” (“On the Way to Jorasanko”). Calcutta is a cosmopolis of contradictions—that it raises “a rampart, /a fortress for devis/ but leaves only broken/roads for Monobina and Jahanara?” (“Monobina”). Layered with its own set of “opposites and in-betweens”, the city smiles like an enigmatic Monalisa (“Monalisa?”). The contradictions are not entropic enough to throw Calcutta out of gear—“Here, poverty does not cloy, /does not destroy. But creates/ kintsugied art that touches heart” (“Kintsugied”). Gastronomically speaking, the Gourmet City “digests all cuisines”, which it devours “with devotion and delight” (“Chelow Kebab”). The 250 years old Banyan of the Bengal Presidency “spreads/ its foliage to home diverse/ lives, despite lightnings, storms.” (“The Great Banyan”).

Mitali’s poetic drift is not racy, it is not without punctuations.HerCalcutta celebrates life with “long pauses for siesta and adda” (“Calcasians”). Instead of invoking the idiom of the usual apocalyptic collapse or

irreversible dystopic dystrophies, she remains non-melodramatic—a stoic with a smile. The raging super cyclonic storms—from Amphan to Dana—that rise in the Bay of Bengal do cast their gloomy shadows, but the city evinces resilience: “Ripping old stories for new, /the tornado grows till it/ exhausts unto a steady flow.” (“Longings”). Even “seashells that smile at the sea” embody spirit of the city as they “murmur softly, / eternal proof of/ resilience to death” (“Waiting...”). Tagore, Nazrul, Teresa—as conscience keepers of Calcutta culture—keep knocking the poet’s inner body sensorium as reminders of a robust past. What informs the self reflexive poet in moments of such stalemate are the words of wisdom uttered by some unnamed guru: “Time past—one guru had said—is/ contained in time present and future” (“Buddha in Kolkata”). In such a temporal back-and-forth moment, the city turns into an archive in flux, a tale in motion, “a single life trying to/ override the eternal soul”—defying standard logic of linear progression.

The collection is not just about the people of Calcutta, it is also about its geography, its seashore, its ghaats, its trees, and even its traffic, which

collectively weave a narrative of belonging. The poet yokes together history and geography of the city into one continuum: “We will never know/ for tied to geographies,/ histories grow roots/ that defy clouds” (“Buddha in Darjeeling?”). She hears “the hoofbeats of history” in the soil of the land. Mitali Chakravarty does not offer an easy narrative of ‘Calcutta versus Kolkata’. She underlines the embeddedness of one into the other: “Kolkata now stays/ embedded with its/ bedrock in Calcutta, /...” The changes are suggested, but in the form of mild-mannered open-ended questions – “Calcutta was born/ of love, yet Kolkata/ weeps lovelorn? Why? / Why does Kolkata cry? (“Why does Kolkata Cry?”). Elsewhere, the same poetic trope is used: “Calcutta was safe –/ women walked tall. /What happened to/ Kolkata of zillion/malls and walls?” (“The City Whispers”). Kolkata frees the poet; it binds her as well.

A city which has been infamously described by a range of writers as “a dying city”, “a widow in the white sari”, “a slow boiled sewer”, or as “a Great Black Hole” of urban India, is reclaimed by the poet as a city “that glows with humanity’s overflow, never overcrowding”. It is with such redeeming equipoise that the poet rediscovers the city and its people—known for their “certain sense of humour/ that stays, acerbic yet friendly”. The readers of the poems feel the pulse of the city as they navigate along with the poet through its bustling bylanes and busy boimelas, museums and mutts, colleges and coffee houses. Some images stay back and reverberate in the mind, and one among them is: “Now, a pigeon sits on her head” (“Bengal Presidency”). It caricatures the Empire, it lends wings to a post-colonial city, no longer reeling under the pressures of a capital of the nation.

Mitali Chakravarty is a serious poet; she would add to her repertoire of emotions if she could harbour the playfulness of the Eden Gardens or Kolkata Derby within her poetic radar.

Prof. Akshaya Kumar is a professor of English at Panjab University, Chandigarh. He received critical attention for his book, Poetry, Politics and Culture (Routledge, 2009) and his co-edited volume, Cultural Studies in India (Routledge, 2016).

REFLECTIONS

‘SHE AND HER CAT’ and the quiet power of presence

NAZIBA BASHER

She and Her Cat (first published in 2013), by Makoto Shinkai and Naruki Nagakawa, was a gift to me, someone who has lived with cats for over 20 years—given with a cat-shaped bookmark, no less (my friends know me well).

I had wanted to read it for a while, given it’s been 12 years since its publishing, but hadn’t bought it, guiltily eyeing the unfinished stack of books at home. But once it landed in my hands, I didn’t hesitate. “Let the others wait,” I thought.

On a work trip to China, I finally opened it because I always spend flights with a book. Midair between Dhaka and Kunming, I began the first chapter.

She and Her Cat is a quiet, slender book. A set of interlinked short stories set in Tokyo, written from both the human and feline perspectives. But don’t let the size fool you, there is emotional density here. Not the kind that knocks you over, but the kind that sits beside you quietly and lets you unravel. Just like a cat does.

Each story is rooted in the everyday: a lonely young woman in her first job, a painter trying to find her way, a manga aficionado who lost her best friend and is in need of confidence. And alongside each of them are their cats.

But these aren’t just cat companions. They are narrators, observers, quiet sentinels of their humans’ inner lives. Chobi, the stray-turned roommate; Cookie, the shy observer; Blanche, who still remembers being a kitten and watching her mother; Kuro, who dominated his territory but melted whenever another needed help. Each feline voice brings something soft but knowing. A sort of patient watchfulness. Even Jon the dog, with all his wisdom and love for the creatures around him, is portrayed as the all-knowing figure the cats are deeply attached to, especially Chobi.

In one story, Chobi watches his human grow lonelier by the day, unable to help her beyond being present. He muses, “She looked



PHOTO: NAZIBA BASHER

tired. So, I rubbed against her leg.” That line carries the entire book’s philosophy: that the act of staying, of simply being, is often more powerful than trying to fix.

There is no grand drama here. The biggest events are small heartbreaks, like a job that feels hollow, a lover’s absence, a memory that lingers. Yet, when told through the dual gaze of human and cat, they feel profound. Like when grieving Miyu sits in a dark apartment

thinking she is completely alone, only to realise her cat is watching, listening and silently loving her.

The cats don’t just narrate the present; they carry their own memories too.

In one of the most affecting narratives, the cats of different women are revealed to be connected—littermates, separated early but

dreaming of each other across time, or meeting by chance on neighbouring streets. It adds a soft strand of speculative magic to an otherwise grounded world. Not fantasy exactly, but a reminder that cats move through time, and us, differently.

There is also humour here, gentle and cat-like. One of the narrators complains

about being picked up like a loaf of bread. Another remarks on how little their human understands despite being so “smart” in the human world. These glimpses into feline thought are light and familiar. Anyone who has ever been judged by a cat will recognise the tone.

But the heart of the book is its deep compassion. Not just for cats, but for women.

Each human character is dealing with quiet sorrow, isolation, or uncertainty. They are not broken, just tired. And in a world that doesn’t ask them how they are doing, their cats always know. The cats don’t always understand the human specifics, but they recognise sadness. They notice routines. And most of all, they stay.

She and Her Cat doesn’t try to be loud. And that is its strength.

It lets the emotions trickle in, like sunlight on fur, until you realise you have been softened by it. The final story ties the narrative threads into something quietly beautiful. It is not neat, but it is connected.

The women don’t necessarily find happiness, not all of them at least. But they find resilience. They also find love but not the one they perhaps hoped for. Instead, it is unexpected and unconditional.

I didn’t cry reading this book. I smiled, a lot, the whole way through my journey. Every flight to, through, and back from China, it was like I had a hanger in my mouth as I flipped through each page.

Because I knew—I recognised the weight of a paw on the chest when the world feels heavy. I knew the look in a cat’s eyes when they sense you are falling apart. They pretend not to notice; they just curl closer.

If you have ever loved a cat, or been loved by one, this book won’t surprise you. It will just feel like home.

Naziba Basher is a journalist at The Daily Star.