

BOOK REVIEW: POETRY

Poetry in short-hand

Review of Kiriti Sengupta’s ‘Selected Poems’ (Transcendent Zero Press, 2025), edited by Dustin Pickering

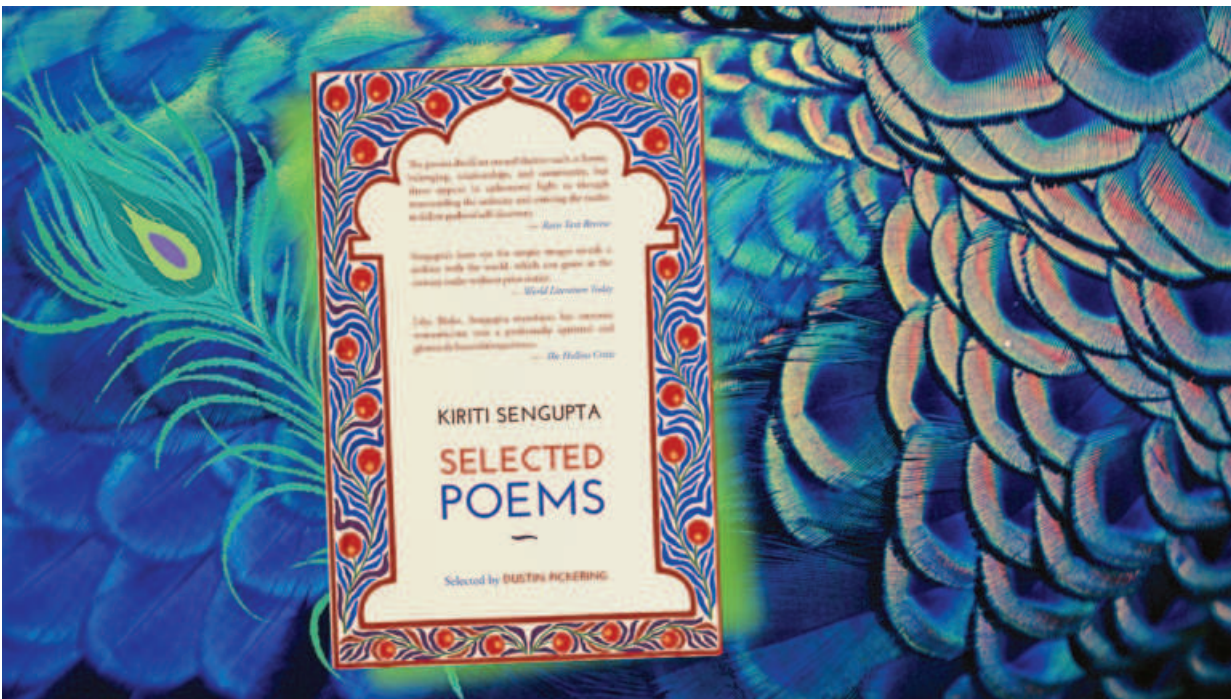
The poems selected from the collection *Healing Waters, Floating Lamps* (Moments Publication, 2015), go on to consolidate Kiriti’s distinct poetics of sprinting towards epiphanic profundities. There is no build-up, no sustained effort to protract the process, and no patience to withhold the climax.

AKSHAYA KUMAR

The idea of outsourcing the selection of poems to a fellow poet-publisher Dustin Pickering, lends the already published poems of Kiriti Sengupta another round of robust readership. From his debut collection *My Glass of Wine* (Author’s Empire Publications, 2013) to the present batch which contains eight recent poems, Sengupta has so far authored nine collections—a reasonably sizeable corpus of poetry. More than shifts in his style and substance, what stands in this selection is the steadfast consistency with which Kiriti has survived the flashy poetic trends that keep emanating from the space of new media. He retains his signature style—of using words frugally and minimally, with no extra flourish to gloss them with any uncanny poetic surplus. His poems—shorter or longer—continue to be reflective, quasi-mediative, and mildly ironic at times, but there is no anxiety to announce apocalypses or to exclaim some earth-shaking denouements.

The propensity to write aphoristically is palpable right from the beginning. The poem “In Tune” is remarkably dense, and compact: “Remaining under self-control—/ the tongue and the heart have fallen in love./ Look zeroize them—/ be a bird!”. Kiriti’s aphorisms are not abstract or thin; they are steeped in heavy textuality. The transitions are not supplied on the platter, it is for the discernible reader to leapfrog from one nano-image to another. Reading this kind of poetry is not a one-sided affair, it demands unqualified readerly plunge as well. Within the space of a few lines, Kiriti suggests a dialectical relationship between ascending fears, and deeper roots that “hold them tighter” (from “Wide”).

From Kiriti’s *The Reverse Tree* (Moments Publication, 2014), Dustin



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

Pickering plucks out only two poems, which is unfair to the range of the eclectic book which consists of neither well-defined essays, nor short fiction, nor even standalone poems. But both the poems amply bring out Kiriti’s ways of dealing with the original unheard. He admits “defining soul is difficult/ rather impossible”, yet in the course of the poem, he ventures to bask under its light: “I press two fingers firmly/ on my ears/ let the light dazzle/ my imprisoned candle” (“Reversal – Reverse All”). By a strange poetic argument, the poet sees sexuality as a function of light: “The sun dares to surface/ on your mirror, playing both/ a she, and a he toy” (“Crisis”). Kiriti dissects light, and its each splinter gives him a complementary clue of life, its gay

ambivalence.

The poems selected from the collection *Healing Waters, Floating Lamps* (Moments Publication, 2015), go on to consolidate Kiriti’s distinct poetics of sprinting towards epiphanic profundities. There is no build-up, no sustained effort to protract the process, and no patience to withhold the climax. The poem takes off, and it plummets in seconds to complete the arc. In order to “reach for the sky”, the poet draws “a circle in the water”, and in the next half-a-second “Looking at the image/ I [he] take[s] a dip” (from “Beyond the Eyes”). The poet does not short circuit the experience, rather he seeks to capture the ephemeral ecstasy without any verbal smokescreen. Similarly, a Varanasi evening is captured in its

oxymoronic exuberance: “The water here is not/ a fire extinguisher./ Flames rise through the water” (“Evening Varanasi”). In the poem “Eyes of Yogi”, a mother bird quietly sits on her eggs, and soon in a flash the poet spots “tiny wings”. The overwhelming concluding line: “The mother transforms into the sky”, springs forth—the sight lapses into insight—in a flicker.

In Kiriti’s poetry, the reader has to be ready, receptive, and wide-eyed to catch the pregnant poetic moment. His mantra for the artist is “keep an eye” not on the outer earthly details, but on the incisive third eye. “Memories,” the poet muses, “unveil themselves through snapshots” (“Moon — The Other Side”). The idiom turns increasingly oblique and at times brutally sarcastic: “You have

been practicing/ postures for health and fun./ Kali never fails to protrude/ her long, bloody tongue” (from “Cryptic Idioms–3”). Even in his prose poems, which gather conspicuousness in his collection *The Earthen Flute* (Hawakaal Publishers, 2016), he does not write in a single stretch, rather he breaks his poems into mini autonomous sections.

In his *Reflections on Salvation* (Transcendent Zero Press, 2016), Kiriti writes 18 short sardonic prose-verses with each corresponding a chapter of the Bhagavad Gita. Out of the 18 verses of “flash wisdom”, the Selected Poems, consists of only 10 that interrogate the relationship between the scriptural and the secular, between the sublime and the sensual. Caught between the pulls of renunciation and attachment, the poet attempts to re-write the self-evident gospels with the modesty of a mortal. In his reflection on “Detachment”, his playful interjection, for instance, is pertinent: “I plan to donate a few copies of the Geeta to infertility clinics. I would love to hear them advise: ‘Act, but forget!’”. Even as he questions the full-proof divinity, he is not loud, audacious or heroic which does not allow, thankfully, the reflections to be incantatory. Incantations can be very intimidating.

This is an excerpt. Read the full review on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books and Literature’s* websites.

Akshaya Kumar is 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). He is writing *A Critical History of Punjabi Literature, a project commissioned by Orient Blackswan*. He has also co-edited a volume titled *Popular Culture in South Asian Context* (Routledge, 2025).

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

A graphic rebellion against patriarchy

Review of ‘Pitritonttrer Poton’ (UPL, 2025) by Marta Breen and Jenny Jordahl (illustrator), translated by Fahmi Ela

JUHI RUBABA JURANA JAHAN

We are living in the advancing era, mended meticulously with dreams and expectations. It is the era of new norms. And yet, a woman asking for the basic human rights will be scrutinised for standing up for herself. They are caught up in a never-ending cycle that extends borders. It is the reality, and there are expectations that these conditions will improve over time. Unfortunately, though, the dreams are just that—dreams. *Pitritonttrer Poton* (originally *Smash the Patriarchy*) captures the similar prevalence of patriarchy throughout the generations and its impact on all genders, including men themselves.

The graphic nonfiction is an excellent display of historical examples of women who have opposed patriarchy—the brave and the unfortunate who were exemplary for fighting against inequality, injustice, and instability. This includes major figures such as the French revolutionary Charlotte Corday, and Alexandra Mikhailovna Kollontai who was a Russian revolutionary, politician, diplomat, and Marxist theoretician. The book explores the power dynamics that have been consistent throughout history. Despite these constraints, many revolutionary women have spoken out about the challenges they and other contemporary women face. Consequently, the author does an amazing job by mentioning these brilliant voices advocating for equality and equity.

The book opens with portraying a humorous discussion between illustrated versions of Marta Breen and Jenny Jordahl’s characters, which immediately sets an exciting and engaging tone. Although the mood is meant to be humorous, the messages that come along with it are powerful and serious. Jordahl’s humorous illustrations add another layer of appeal. These are essentially drawn in a comic style to make the book more intriguing and fun to read. However, it does not minimise women’s growing awareness of resistance to injustice; rather, it incorporates their attempts to raise awareness relentlessly in a unique way.

Wherever history takes us, whether we are navigating through textbooks or

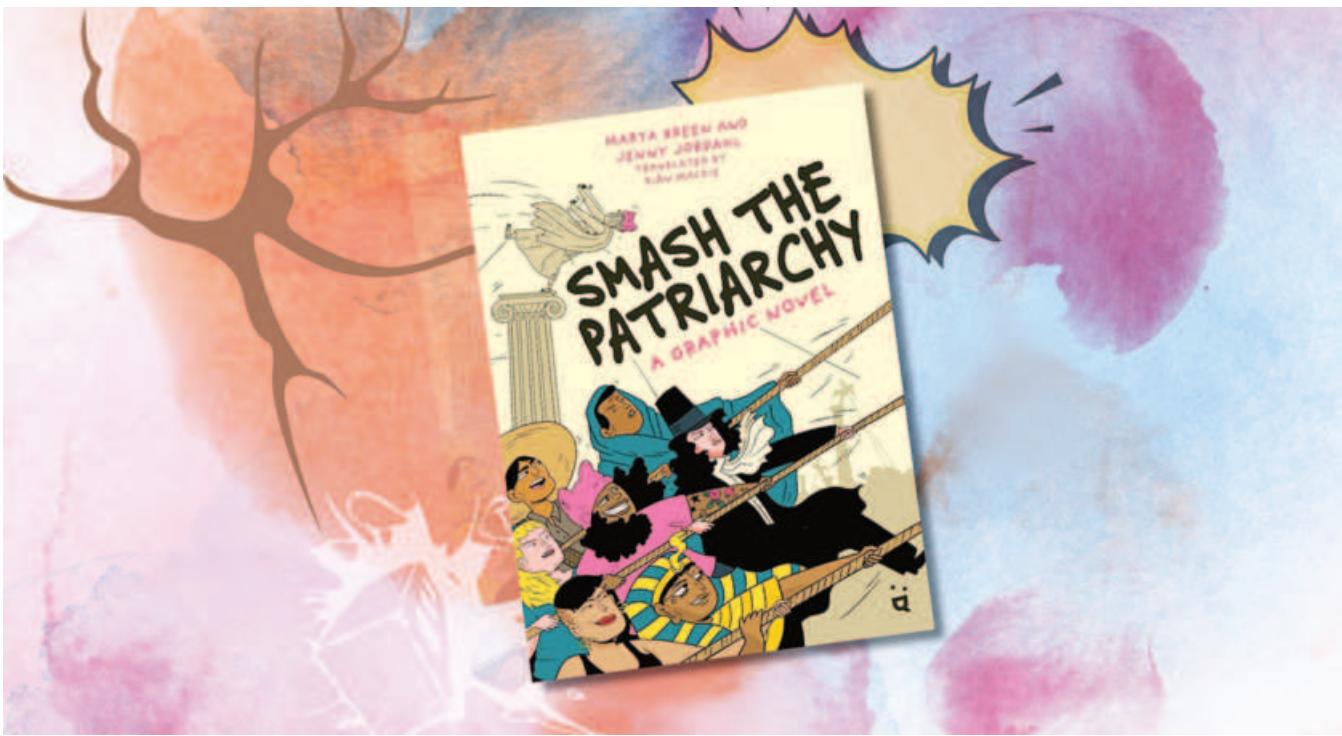


ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

pictures, every medium is filled with depictions of glorious empires like that of the Greco-Roman civilisations. There are acknowledgments of exceptional contributions, mostly by male figures from numerous fields; areas they have improved with their knowledge and exceptional calibre—figures who have been celebrated throughout history, glorified, and even overglorified for their work, but who, at the same time, harbour some questionable perceptions women. The author mentions several of these prominent male figures, ranging from philosophers to playwrights. For example, the renowned German philosopher Immanuel Kant and his oft-cited opinion: “A woman who becomes learned loses her charm”, as well as Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s, who said, “If woman is made to please and to be subjugated to man, she ought to make herself pleasing to him rather than to provoke him.”

It is relatively easier to break, stretch, and forge a woman in accordance with the convenience of society rather

than changing the flawed system. The outright declaration of internalised misogyny these men harbour are often overshadowed owing to their “genius” but in the same exact field, female intellectuals need to overcome barriers that they solely face as women and often “prove themselves” in order to become established. The book talks about women using pseudonyms and cross dressing to portray themselves as men and prove their competence—all because women are often presented as a secondary race who carry no agency of their own.

Fahmi Ela’s translation captures the energy of Breen’s words. The feminist message remains just as sharp and impactful in Bangla with Ela’s potent use of Bangla phrases and expressions. In the same vein, Jordahl’s vibrant use of colour makes the illustration both visually striking but aesthetically pleasing at the same time. Like Breen has her way of using the harsh, uncomfortable language that society has frequently used against women, Jordahl’s illustrations too highlight oppression, brutality, and the

bareness that portray scenes of violence, showing how women’s bodies, along with their voices, have been subjugated.

There are some parts where the names or the years of historical figures might seem information heavy, however, the author here has divulged in-depth and provided detailed insights into the lives of these figures. It maps out the patriarchal structures, offering new perspectives for those who are skeptical about feminist notions.

Pitritonttrer Poton narrows down to one aim: dismantling patriarchy; this concept is well integrated into the information provided in this book, a phenomenon that has been overlooked for many years and has been normalised. Consequently, as a people, we have unintentionally become accustomed to and accept misogyny even in the most intellectual spheres of society.

Juhi Rubaba Jurana Jahan is a creative enthusiast and someone who lives through art. Feel free to reach out at rubaba.juranas@gmail.com.

YOUR DHAKA WEEK

Readings, exhibitions, and performances shaping the city’s creative pulse



Arshinagar Dhaka presents a theatrical take on Hermann Hesse’s 1922 novel *Siddhartha*, set to run at the Experimental Theatre Hall, Shilpakala Academy, from November 19 to 21.