



The Poetry of Gopal Lahiri: A Weaver of Magic and Mystery

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Abstract:

This paper critically discusses the poetry of Mumbai based, Indian poet Gopal Lahiri. It focuses on his three published volumes of poetry – *Silent Steps (Cyberwit)*; *Living Inside (Authorspress)*; and *Tidal Interlude (Shambhabi)*. I argue that Lahiri is like an ethereal gypsy of the night, his poems weaving magic spells which delight the soul and stir the heart. His poems cover a broad range of themes but always nature in her beauty and mystery is close at hand. Lahiri is a professional earth scientist and I believe his close contact with the world of nature has expanded his appreciation and understanding of the subtleties and moods of the earth. His personal love poems are gentle and poignant, quite often bittersweet, and reflect upon the love we may desire but cannot always have. His mystical poems evoke the moon, the heavens and all the mysteries of our inner worlds, I personally like these poems the most as we get a sense of something we cannot completely grasp but know is just beyond the veil of illusion. Lahiri's activist poems are confronting and seek to bring about change for the downtrodden of the world, these poems are visionary in intent and are particularly relevant in contemporary Indian society where the disparity between the "haves" and the "have-nots" is perhaps more obvious than in most other countries, in fact, existing side-by-side on a daily basis.

Keywords: Gopal Lahiri, poetry, Living Inside, Silent Steps, Tidal Interlude, the moon, weaving magic.

Our contemporary global society is dominated by puerile images and textual overload. Vacuous messages devoid of spiritual and intellectual content dominate our smart phones, smart televisions and daily tabloids. Poetry, contrary to what one would expect, seems to be having a post-postmodern Renaissance, perhaps in direct response to the banal, commercial nature of most contemporary messages.

India seems to be one of the leaders of this poetry Renaissance including both established mature poets, and new younger poets appearing almost daily. I am astonished by the number of Indian poets writing in English today. It has been my privilege to be deeply involved with many of these poets over the past five or six years at all levels including; mentorship, editing, reviewing and publishing.

As to be expected many of these poets are 'average' in ability, a few rather poor, and a few 'exceptional'. Gopal Lahiri is one of the exceptional poets writing in Indian English today. I reviewed his book "*Living Inside*" in late 2014 and have incorporated parts of that review in this essay. I opened that review suggesting that Lahiri was an ethereal gypsy of the night, his poems weaving magic spells which delight the soul and stir the heart. I can think of no higher quality of poetry than this. *Living Inside* is a perfect title for this collection. The reader will notice, even after a first casual reading, that well over a third of the poems contain either direct or indirect references to the *moon*, the *night* and to *dreams*. From the title poem, *Living Inside*.

in the night the moon swells and tear apart

the shadow path of the hidden stars

an attempt to escape in silence. (Lines: 11 - 13) (p. 17)

The moon is the mysterious goddess of the night in Western mythological and esoteric traditions, she rules the subconscious, the realm of dreams and our 'inner lives'. These attributes, together with a sensitive, caring appreciation of the natural world are the main substance of Gopal's poetry.



There are far too many examples of the moon's eerie presence in the poems to mention but here are a few lines from different poems in *Living Inside* that illustrate my point.

the night darkens, the moon struggles/ (Lines: 9 – 10) (p. 64)

*the stretch of sun and moon, the stillness, the pillage
in one possibility, another possibility always remains./* (Lines: 13 – 14) (p. 74)

*the moon is perhaps behind the real time
it seems safe to come out in the vast open,/* (Lines: 5 – 6) (p. 59)

*the cruel moon can't possibly
hold that much love and grief/* (Lines: 1 – 2) (p. 33)

Lahiri has two additional volumes of his own poetry; *Silent Steps* (2010), and *Tidal Interlude* (2015). Further he has collaborated with Kiriti Sengupta to produce the anthology, *Scaling Heights* (2014). His work is featured in numerous literary journals and anthologies. This essay will discuss Lahiri's work in *Silent Steps*, *Living Inside* and *Tidal Interlude*.

One of Lahiri's powerful attributes is his ability to juxtapose different elements to create a dynamic effect, he does this masterfully in *Living Inside* with the Sun and Moon, contrasting the mystical element of earth with the ethereal, hard-to-grasp mysteries of the night, From the long poem, *Kumarakom*.

*azure sky, crisp clouds,
soft sunlight – rolls into
an orange yellow screen
spreading colour; the various
shades and hues of flowers
lay scatter all around by
rocking of the soothing breeze
connect the long pending
mystical elements of the earth.* (Lines: 50 -58) (p. 31)

Before further analysis of *Living Inside* and *Tidal Interlude* I will look at Lahiri's first book *Silent Steps*, in this volume the poems concern more grounded themes than the ethereal ones of his two following collections. There are a number of poems in this collection which deal openly and starkly with injustices and the plight of poor, downtrodden citizens. Many poems exalt the beauty of nature, giving a voice to the bees, flowers, rain and even the "dust of life". Lahiri paints wonderful images of nature, and much to his credit does so using simple, day-to-day language. From *Rebirth*.

*Humming bees come and go
Pouring spores and pollen
Stroking the tiny buds
Slowly but surely the flower
Burst into life in no time.* (Lines: 6 - 10) (p. 11)

Lahiri uses metaphor masterfully, both line-by-line as in the first poem's lines below, and at times the complete poem is a metaphor, where, for example seemingly casual material observations refer to either spiritual transformation or to bittersweet love affairs, as in the poem *Last Stair* which I reproduce in its entirety. From *Now The Time Has come to Met You*.



*Expressive eyes for resemblance
Proud and exulting like a flowing river
Growing tall like a lean tree.*

No field is greener than your dress (Lines: 3 – 6) (p. 9)

*From the Last Stair
Get down to the last stair
Weaving a thought
Perhaps I have to wait a little more
Perhaps I need that.*

*What will happen?
If the tearful days never gone past
If you fan the reluctant oven.*

*Before touching water
Memories burnt soul
Images of rebirth flicker.*

*Whatever be the means
What else you do except
To cling to your words.*

*Before I reach you
Give me some more time
From your heart. (Lines: 1 – 16) (p. 5)*

Even the title of the book, *Silent Steps* can be seen as an enigmatic metaphor in itself, in the magnificent title poem of this book we see Gopal at his poetic best: mystery, metaphor and enigmatic imagery abound, here it is in its entirety.

*Nowhere to go no brick laid path to walk
The house the trees the grassland remains the same
Sometimes darkness soars, the sky becomes jet black.*

*I can not see any further
I know I have to go one day
Crossing the field the river the sand mound
To reach a place where no one ever visit
To mesmerize all and sundry.*

*When rain come down in midnight
I come out in silent steps to the open air
No it's not rain anymore
It's the roar of dusty wind
Will anyone remember my passing away?*

*Exhausted I come back to my old room
Light filters through broken partitions*



*To the narrow bed and torn pillows
Tears falling inside in surges
It's all; my days and nights. (Lines:1 – 18) (p. 50)*

I noted earlier that in *Silent Steps* Lahiri highlights the plight of downtrodden individuals, he does so in a most heart-rending and sensitive way, for example in the poem *Steamroll* we see the disparity between the “haves” and the “have-nots” of this world and the unconscionable attitude of the latter.

*For a while the earth stands motionless
Cluster of homeless people on the pavements
Bundles of their belongings gather dust.*

*Sitting on the shades of balcony
You choose to ignore the sight
Squeeze your nose and spit in disgust.*

*Forsaken by everyone of this world
Seething with anger the hungry faces
Look at you in utter disdain. (Lines: 1 – 9) (p. 37)*

And again in *Face The Music* we experience the tragedy of the dispossessed, often Dalits in India, but it could be in any other country where the homeless, “sleep rough” in close proximity to the walls of the mansions of the wealthy.

*Nobody knows who has turn them blind
No eyes can bear these
Injustice and inequalities.*

*They own no fields no meadows no plot of land
Writhe in helplessness
Wounded are not caressed.*

*Who cares for them?
Rows and rows of bricks create wall
Only to isolate them.*

*Sensitive minds wither in a dark corner
Who can save the fragrance of flowers?
Pain, anguish, hunger incarnate.*

*To earn their might to face obstacles
They have to muster courage
They are now unknown dots in the map (Lines: 15) (p. 39)*

In the poem *Remember*, Lahiri offers a solution, “weave the hope of dawn right now”, recognise the “sugar coated mouth” for what it is, he is really saying it is up to everyone to help abolish the wealth disparity in our communities. These three poems illustrate my point that Lahiri’s poetry covers many aspects of life, including poetry which has a visionary quality for a better, more just world.



*It will change the world
Make you someone else
A drive for the downtrodden.*

*Strategists in the party
With sugar coated mouth
Put on a chocolate smile.*

*Words and noise gushing out
From the bottom of the heart
Of the fatty cheer leaders.*

*Inert bodies need to be wiped out
Movers and shakers frown
Eyelids whisper stories.*

*After all it is awfully bad
But what can we do?
Let us weave the hope of dawn right now.*

*Look at the mirrors that do not lie
Falsehood and empty promises
This is not truth, only politics for you.*

*A dissenting note echoes
From the assembled crowd
REMEMBER*

A single voice never remains single. (Lines: 1 – 22) (p. 47)

Renowned poet Charles Simic brilliantly noted: “What they forget is that a poem is an instant of lucidity in which the entire organism participates. It may not make shopkeeper's sense. This is what haunts, a world where magic is possible, where chance reigns, where metaphors have their supreme logic, where imagination is free and truthful.” (Simic, 1985) The poetry in *Living Inside* addresses spiritual matters with vivid imagery to paint colourful pictures in the reader's mind. Simic's “metaphor and magic” indeed excites us in Lahiri's poems as he explores silence, darkness and the unknown recesses of the mind. The first verse of *We Lie Empty* this one from a recent anthology, *The Dance of the Peacock* (Jha, 2013).

*In a quiet room with no window
Exploring the forms of life in darkness,
A search for strange and unknown depth,
We move our dreams and destinations.
We fall for the inner mysteries and Shadows.
A speedy river flows into our veins and arteries,
We hear the flapping sound of the marine birds.
(Lines: 1 - 7) (p. 146)*

Lahiri is a master poet employing all the attributes of great poetry - imagery, metaphor, simple language, and a gentle cadence. There is an elusive depth to many of his poems, this is only plumbed after a number of close readings. Metaphors may be quite obvious or rather subtle, in the



poem *Time Device* for example Lahiri uses metaphor in subtle and intriguing ways.

*wafts of burning hung in the air; it was post summer,
the evening scored to a slow and sifting rhythm
in search of the mysterious golden light,
no different than mirrors of yours and mine.
skin tight jeans giggled outside on the pavement
the biggest smile still clung to the armchair;
at times pushed back and forth for comfort (Lines: 6 – 11) (p. 43)*

As with the subtle use of metaphor Gopal's use of rhyme and gentle cadence is also subtle, for example in the lines of the poem *Fence*

*The form and style infuse
The meter and tempo to
A logical path, a careful walk
Only to bring the sunshine and shade
The forgotten pain and scar of the sharpened tip. (Lines: 6 - 10 (p. 52)*

Some of Lahiri's poems are concerned with injustices and poverty but these poems are more observations of a situation rather than proselytising lectures. For example in *Chasing Stars* the grim reality of a harsh life is portrayed. Sometimes this gentle approach has more impact and power to bring about change than a direct hard hitting approach.

*in the summer night
of this quaint town
streets of temples
litter with rubbles
dingy house
with broken bricks
ravaged by greed.
a slum boy
sits alone
weak bones
dirty clothes
eyes squinty
look up and up
still chasing stars. (Lines: 1 – 14) (p. 32)*

Living Inside contains seventy poems preceded by a Foreword by Sunil Sharma and Preface by Gary Robinson, both internationally acclaimed writers and poets. As Sharma says in the Foreword. "Reading Lahiri can be sensory and visual delight. You are wafted on words to a different realm. It is a gift special to the poet. His poems are surcharged with electricity enough to jolt us out of somnolence. Only great poets can achieve this desired result." I agree with this statement completely and Gopal is certainly one such poet.

As Gary Robinson says in the Preface, "...no mere chronicler he is also a guide taking the reader into regions of the heart and mind like rooms to joy or sadness. He does not shirk from the human condition and all its complexities." The poem *Other Side* needs careful reading to reveal its hidden



meanings, it appears as a great rhetorical poem of an inner conversation, but? – I believe that it hints at the folly of unconsidered personal opinion and self-deception. Two verses below:

*if this is true
then there will be
a charming audience
ignoring the
multiple layers
of blatant lie
that rages daily.*

*rudeness or reward
formulate questions
without any answer
more often
we want to see in
black and in white. (Lines: 19 – 31) (p. 41)*

I will now discuss Lahiri's third book – *Tidal Interlude*. Firstly, I must mention a noticeable continuity across Lahiri's three books, to me this is commendable and an attribute of a talented and sophisticated poet. His signature themes of nature; brightness/darkness; sun//moon; tidal ebb and flow are present in all three books, however, these are not just rehashed versions of previous poems but fresh and exciting, and always enigmatic "takes" on the themes mentioned. *Tidal Interlude*, itself a metaphor, is a wonderful title and reflects not only one of Lahiri's recurring themes, the tide "...which reflects energy of swell and the inherent interlude"(p. 9) but also that 'liminal zone' of mystery where tide approaches and recedes at the shoreline. From the poem *Water*

*The ripples sound low, unstated for a while.
Bleary evening settles quietly on the river water.
The fading colour of the twilight pushes the envelope.
Of the starry night and the whispering breeze.
The ringing sound of the distant temple bell,
A link between the past and the primordial, (Lines: 4 - 9) (p. 16)*

One very good description of Lahiri's poetry is by Sunil Sharma in his introduction to this book: "[he is] an acute observer of the usual, the ordinary; the everyday and aestheticizing those tiny bits and fragments into startling metaphors and images that glow like the jugnoo or fireflies in the scented dark of a verdant valley." (p. 7)

Like all good poetry, re-reading reveals new layers of meaning, with each reading we experience layer-upon-layer which bring about new levels of cognition. As Usha Kisore states in her introduction: "This collection is a journey into solitude; into the poet's mindscape, profound, philosophical, yet not totally unrealistic". Then further, "Subtle metaphors and refined sensory images sketch the terrains of the poet's mindscape and his perception of the outside world, knitting an exquisite arabesque of the inner and outer self."
(p. 5)

As I mentioned earlier, throughout *Living Inside* Lahiri constantly evokes the mystery and mood of the moon in the dark firmament of space, he continues his almost mesmerising infatuation with the



Lady of Night in *Tidal Interlude*. As an aside, the moon is of course responsible for the ebb and flow of ‘tidal’ movement on earth, a coincidence perhaps? From the poem *My Space*.

*Facing the blank stonewall and cry
Again the moon comes in and out,
The darkness beating to the tune of
Silence, wrestles with the trials,
A deep dive in space and resolve
like a simple and short equation. (Lines: 15 -22) (p. 23)*

When Lahiri is not directly referring to the moon he often alludes to its presence and the starry firmament for example in the enigmatic poem *Admission*.

*Looking at the glass window
the fragile bones of the lonely comet could
easily fall and spill.
The starry night
Silent and still,
Burdened with mystery and milky ways,
Told more than you could tell. (Lines: 13 -19) (p. 22)*

The moon sheds her eerie light even in his more hard hitting activist poems, such as in *The Wall of Silence* below. This powerful poem is an example of Lahiri’s concern with unjust social conditions. Truly powerful poetry is concerned with universal themes not only personal emotional ones, Lahiri’s poems address both concerns. Here “*songs are sung in silence*” just as the moon is silent. Who is listening to the plight of such people, is the resounding rhetorical question?

*Scrubbed its walls, deconstructed,
people can slip through the cracks;
escape with only sadness.
a stack of six burnt chapattis,
roofs scorching black
from the cooking fire,
empty sacks of flour
filthy water in a mug, cold,
at the edge of the garbage dump.
a squinty eyed rickety woman
scratching her old wounds,
numbed, scarred. stick to her side
bloated bellies, blank faces of children,
sucking their thumbs.
lives continues to be lived.
pungent smoke fills the dirty lanes,
the silver moon besieged,
melts slowly in despair.
songs continue to be sung in silence. (Lines: 1 – 19) (p. 31)*

I have attempted to show in this paper the versatility of Gopal Lahiri as a modern Indian-English poet. A master of intuiging imagery and subtle metaphor, he is a powerful voice in contemporary Indian English poetry, his work growing from strength to strength each year. I look forward to



reading future publications by Lahiri in which I am sure he will continue to weave his unique poetic magic.

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