

REVIEWS

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The Beauty of Patterns: A review of *Five Poems* by Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay

What purpose does poetry serve in life? Is it just a medium to express your inner desires, your thoughts and reflections? Or is it a lyrical accounting of life's additions and subtractions? Maybe it's just a diary where you record everything you observe in words and wish that they would turn into images when you would revisit them. Poetry can mean so many things to different people.

What happens when you are reading poems written by a person with disability, more specifically a learning disability? Do you look for breadcrumbs that paint a picture of the poet's disability or how he has overcome it? Should poetry by a person with disability be primarily about disability? How representational it is of disabled lives even when the poet is not talking about disability? This review will try to reflect on all these questions through the poetry of Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay.

Tito was born with Autism. He is tagged as someone with severe or low functioning autism. (Savarese, 2010). His severe autism would not have been as important if we lived in a world where people on the spectrum were treated with respect. Perhaps a place where their ideas were valued and accepted. But we are not living in that world. The world where we live in constantly questions and humiliates persons with learning disabilities. Your intelligence and ability are always in question. Tito's autism, therefore, acquires a central role in his introduction as a poet.

Tito shifted to America when he was thirteen with his mother (Savarese, 2010). Since the contrived formal educational system seldom has the space for abilities that do not fit into typical tabulations, Tito was home schooled throughout his life. Home was an important space in his life as well as in his poetry, although one is always hesitant about romanticising it. For persons with disabilities, the feeling of being at home can sometimes turn into the feeling of being trapped.

Tito's mother, Soma Mukhopadhyay happens to be an educator. She developed something called 'Rapid Prompting Method' (Mukhopadhyay, 2012), which remains scientifically unproven (OAR, 2012), although it has been used by big technology companies. These companies have henceforth made claims on their product being more accessible for persons

with learning disabilities (Montague, 2018). This method was apparently used to teach Tito and gained quite a lot of media attention in the US. One is tempted to ask more questions about the technicalities involved, even if the scope of this review is to try and peek into his world of words.

What can be said conclusively is that his mother's teaching had a considerable impact on his ability to learn and write. As he says in an interview to Ralph James Savarese, the then editor of *Disability Studies Quarterly* (DSQ):

“I think I began to write because I was introduced to literature very early in life. By the time I was six years old, mother had read aloud to me *Treasure Island* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* along with parallel literature in Bengali and Hindi. As I grew older, mother would ask me if it was “me” who was the author of the fiction she just read and, if so, how I would have ended that story. There was a discipline around my “home school.” Even after teaching a science lesson on “Atoms” or “Blood Cells,” I had to discuss the lesson with passages like “If I were a Proton...” or “If I were a Blood Platelet...” and not mere questions. Perhaps I adopted writing from that discipline. Or perhaps from something more than that. Who knows? It just makes me wonder. Today I write to get published” (Savarese, 2010).

Tito's work has grown over the years. Apart from his two poetry collections, he has also written one short story collection and two biographical/non-fiction books over the years. These books not only bring out the varied nature of his work but also give voice to a perspective which has been missing from mainstream and even disability literature. Most books on autism that one comes across in the mainstream literature have been written by either caretakers, tutors or educators. Tito's writing stands out because of the embodied experiences of his life and how that is crafted into a world of words.

When asked about where he learned his poetry from, in the same interview published in DSQ, he explains, “Who knows from where I learnt it? But one thing is for sure: I was exposed to poems very early on in my life. Mother recites, and used to recite, poems in Bengali, Hindi and English languages. I by-heart most of them because I appreciated the sound pattern. Maybe I felt that my words would sound something like that. Or maybe I did it unintentionally without any kind of care” (Savarese, 2010).

Tito's first collection of poems is titled *I'm Not a Poet But I Write Poetry: Poems from my autistic poetry*. A rather modest title for a poetry collection, it also reminds us of the disclaimers persons with disability often have to put while talking about their abilities. Nonetheless, the title itself puts his disability at the centre. A lived reality. An autistic mind where his words originate from. These words are not different from the words that originate from other minds but the process of how they take shape might have been different.

To delve deeper into how Tito's autistic mind crafts poetry, we will look at five of his poems published in *Disability Studies Quarterly* (Mukhopadhyay, 2010)¹. These five poems published here were the result of his interactions with the editor of DSQ Ralph James Savarese. It was through these interactions; he learned about some traditional forms of poetry and went on to craft his old material into these forms. The poems consist of one free verse poem, three villanelles and one sestina.

§1

A Simple Cup

Routine. Repetition. Pattern. This resonates with the reader in his free verse poem *A simple cup*; something that occurs again and again. For some people routine can be boring. But Tito finds beauty in this routine. The poem immediately creates a very visual image in your head and transports you to Tito's kitchen, where you find yourself with the smiling cup, the food that is being prepared and Tito's observant eyes:

*It lived on the kitchen shelf
like a smile,
watching all the food preparation
from the kitchen shelf.*

It also reminds you of how much time Tito had to spent in that kitchen, observing her mother or caretaker perform daily rituals of domestic life.

Tito sees the pattern. "The filling in, the emptying out." But his gaze can also see go beyond the pattern. "some patches of colours—/ orange and yellow, / randomly marked/ here and there." He sketches the randomness of life through his words and fills it with colours, like a painting. The cup acquires its own personhood as the poem borrows hints of magic realism. The cup is fed only tea. It's yellow and orange stains turn into a smile. A smile that intrigues the poet and then wins his heart.

You start to wonder if the poet sees a reflection of his life in the cup. Sitting on the shelf. Smiling. Finding little joys in daily routine. Even if he doesn't see his reflection in the cup, the cup attains importance in his life. The smiling cup becomes part of his memories and taking a cue from it, the poet starts filling and emptying his own cup, his cup of memories with stories.

Memories play an important role in our lives. They shape who we are and what we want to be. Some memories grow within us as we grow old. Others wither away. Memories that stay with us are not necessarily happy or sad. Sometimes they are just banal memories that are stuck in our head. A home, a kitchen, a cup. To stop memories from fading away, we keep memories alive by sowing them with stories. When memories become too heavy, we fill it

¹ The full texts of all the five poems can be found at: <https://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1192/1256>; here, in the review only relevant excerpts will be quoted.

with a different story, or replace it with something different, something that might help us in keeping away trauma or pain.

In this poem, Tito talks about a similar process, where he fills and empties his cup of memories with stories. No one can do more justice to stories about his life than the poet himself. And thus, he takes up the responsibility of a storyteller, where all his lived memories become part of his stories, his poems, and his art. It also reminds you of the greater human experience, where one has to fill existence with memories and stories in order to find a purpose and may be a smile.

The poem provides a glimpse into Tito's life. It would be unjust to define it only through the routes of disability or autism. His words take a hold on you. Their lyrical beauty wins you over at times. When he says things like "And ever since then, / at a moment called When," you see the quality of the craft. But then, it would be also unfair to completely leave disability out of it. There are so many persons across disabilities who spend their lives at home, sitting in the kitchen as the daily chores are done. They can't find the right schools. They don't have access to caretakers. They can't go out on their own. Therefore, they create their stories from whatever life has to offer. Tito's poem speaks out for many of those voices.

§2

Those Birds

The second poem, *Those Birds*, the first of the three villanelles is well crafted and paints a picture for the audiences. The villanelle is a highly structured poem made up of five tercets followed by a quatrain, with two repeating rhymes and two refrains. (Poets.org, Glossary, n.d.)

The first and third lines of the opening tercet are repeated alternately in the last lines of the succeeding stanzas; then in the final stanza, the refrain serves as the poem's two concluding lines. Using capitals for the refrains and lowercase letters for the rhymes, the form could be expressed as: A1 b A2 / a b A1 / a b A2 / a b A1 / a b A2 / a b A1 A2 (Poets.org, Glossary, n.d.).

These highly structured poems evolved from previous poems after Tito had discussions about poetic forms with the editor of DSQ. This interaction, mentioned in the piece where these five poems were published, displays Tito's grip over his craft and his willingness to learn new things.

In one way, the highly structured form of villanelle which is full of patterns is something that was waiting to be discovered. However, it is not just patterns that the poet's mind is drawn in. A villanelle is by no means an easy form to successfully construct. To put the images in a particular format takes craft of poetry writing that seems to come naturally to Tito.

Coming to the poem itself, the first stanza constructs a clear visual for readers:

Those birds, three and thirty-five,

*Sat on electric cables
Beneath a cloudy sky,
Chirping day and night.*

In that sense, Tito's poems are very visual. You can visualize birds sitting on an electric cable. Three and Thirty-Five. The words leave an impact on you. The birds speak to Tito through their structures. He sees them making a pattern on the cable. Three and Thirty-Five. Their little shapes and little size/ Formed calligraphy on the wires— / A cursive “three and thirty-five”!

Our minds are all different. By finding patterns in these birds, Tito highlights not only the beautiful patterns present in nature but also underlines his imagination, his ability to see them which makes his mind a beautiful one. You can almost imagine a pattern on the cable wire. Three birds sitting together and sitting apart from them a group of thirty-five birds. Why were the three sitting away from the group? Were they different? The poem makes you wonder.

Like the first poem, where the cup from the kitchen is part of his daily life, one gets the impression that the birds too visit outside his window on a regular basis and hang out on the electric cables outside his window. One gets the impression that they are far above, as their shapes seem tiny and everyone has to look up to them.

The cloudy sky forms the background for the birds. He tries to garner their attention with little success. Maybe because they are far away. The sky is rainless for now and there is a light breeze blowing.

From where he looks at them, the birds seem small and on the electric cable they seem like calligraphy. As stated above, the cursive calligraphy is trying to say something or paint something but what they are saying or painting, isn't clear. After failing to decipher the meaning of the patterns they make, the poet tries to decipher the conversation that words are having. Although he is not able to make sense of what they are saying, he is sure that they are more words than just “three and thirty-five”. The cable wires cross each other, and Tito sees a pattern there too, “Checks and stripes”, he notes. In this visual portrait, the birds are at the centre of the world, and everything else around them is just trying to facilitate their story. The trees, the wires, and the clouds.

While the poet's ability to find beautiful patterns and create beautiful imagery with it is remarkable, to assimilate them into a poem which is full of verbal patterns add the complexity of the poem. The image of the birds hanging out on the cable wires on a cloudy day stays with you long after the poem has ended. It reveals the beauty and potential of an artist who can't be defined only in terms of his disability. His worldview is equally important. His voice as a poet is equally enriching. There are so many voices that remain unheard because those voices can't reach beyond the four walls of the house or pages of a personal diary. Tito's voice is not one of them.

§3

The Sunset Hour

What happens when the repetition of style accompanies repetition of images? If I had read the villanelle *The sunset hour* in isolation I might have been more impressed by its poetic quality. But since I read it immediately after *Those Birds*, a villanelle with similar images I was perhaps not as impressed by the poem as I should have been. Or so I thought.

The poem takes us back to the birds, to wires. It's cloudy. The sun is sinking or setting. There is a purple tinge in the sky. The sun looks scrambled because of the clouds in the west. Everything seems scrambled. The cars, the city. People rushing towards their homes. Sunset brings chaos in the world that the poet envisions through this poem. Although similar in style and imagery, this poem has a different emotional tone than the last one.

Tito is painting a picture of everything around him with his imagination. Guessing what the birds are chatting about. Perhaps their homes. He is imagining the rush in downtown. Street pavements are full of people. Cars are caught in traffic. Scrambled like the sun. A scrambling world under a purple sky. The sun is about to leave. Tito can sense the chaos that evening brings. There is uncertainty. It isn't clear if he likes the chaos. There are small hints that it fills him with tension. The sun disappears into the purple sky. People disappear on purple pavements.

Nothing represents change like the evening sky and the city that churns under it. The patterns disappear and the sun no longer assures us with its presence. Afternoon to evening, evening to night. Office to home. Work to rest or vice versa. Tito tries to capture this change through beautiful shades of purple. And scrambled imperfections of everything around him. Perhaps he is talking about his own imperfections. Perhaps he is trying to show how chaotic the process of change is, and the same chaos emerges within him when patterns around him change. Living in an ever-changing world must be different for someone trying to make sense in the patterns that emerge. Specially with all the chaos that comes with change. But then one is perhaps reading far too much into the poem then the poet intends us to. However, the repetition this time through a recurring colour, purple, over and under, and recurring process of scramble everywhere, give us a peep into the poet's mind picking up the effect of scrambling and the dominance of the purple colour.

And of course, it is a poetic masterstroke to realise the rhyming of scramble and purple. And this is what remain with the reader, conspiring almost to create a concept that undergoes scrambling and is purple. Poetic.

§4

Misfit

There seems to be a camera panning out as we delve into the fourth poem. First it was the kitchen, then the cable outside, then the city and now the earth. And this is also symbolic of what Tito has to say in this fourth poem.

This poem is an assertion. An assertion of his autistic identity. His personhood. There is nothing ‘wrong’ with anything. The earth went about its morning routine, turning on its axis, the stars receded, birds went about flying. His hands were flapping. And none of them found anything ‘wrong’ with it.

Flapping. Flapping not like a bird. Flapping. Filled with panic and anxiety. How does it feel to be in panic and anxiety much of the time? What if it is a part of who you are? As Tito shows us, accepting oneself is the best way forward. But will the world understand this? Will the world be equally accepting? Perhaps not, as “Men and women stared at my nodding/ They labelled me a Misfit”, not the birds, but the men and women around him.

People with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities are often targeted by the society. They are tagged as ‘different’, ‘wrong’, ‘special’. Their abilities are questioned. Anything away from the normative is considered wrong. And that is something that Tito questions in this poem. Tito points out that without even knowing who he is, men and women notice his flapping and tag him as a misfit. A misfit who is turning and turning. He tries to draw a parallel between the earth’s turning and his own, a routine, a pattern that is part of their life. His nervousness, his anxiety is part of his routine, part of who he is and yet, he is labelled as a misfit for who he is.

Through this poem, Tito replies to those questioning eyes, those pointing fingers who think he is a misfit. He is speaking for himself but also for other persons with disabilities who go through the same questioning and tagging. He declares in the last paragraph. “Somewhere a wish was rising, /Perhaps from between my laughing lips. /Why stop turning and turning/ When right can be found with everything?”

These lines represent the long-drawn battle persons with disabilities have had to fight within their own families and societies to establish their bodies, their minds, their behaviour as nothing divergent or abnormal but their own unique signature of living life. We are all different. Everyone has quirks. Everyone has a different body. Tito questions why some bodies are more different from others.

What makes a body ‘fit’ in society? Is it their normativity, their productivity, their acceptance? Who gets to decide these things? Tito raises all these questions by asserting his identity. And without mentioning raises it for others too. Not only persons with disabilities, but transgender people, queer people, people that are too fat or too thin. And the definition of who is a misfit also keeps changing with time.

Despite the assertion though, even Tito can't deny the mental toll such a labelling takes on you. When people stare at you, you just want to run away. And then he was the wind, blowing. But since the society does not seem to be changing their ideals of who is considered normal anytime soon, the best way to move forward is to accept your identity. As Tito declares, almost emphatically "Why stop turning and turning/ When right can be found with everything?"

The poet takes several poetic liberties along the way to keep the sanctity of the structure. And maybe because the poem is less about visuals and more about the point he is making, one can ignore paying too much of an attention to structured imagery as compared to the previous poems. Finally, this is a poem where he is speaking out for himself, his identity as an autistic person and as someone who is continuously looked at like a misfit by society. One can see his anger with others and his attempt at self-love. Art is beautiful when it's personal. Art is beautiful when it's political. This poem is both personal and political. And probably that's why, memorable.

§5

Boys in a City Slum

The fifth poem *The Boys in a City Slum* is a sestina that is a complex, thirty-nine-line poem featuring the intricate repetition of end-words in six stanzas and an envoi. The sestina follows a strict pattern of the repetition of the initial six end-words of the first stanza through the remaining five six-line stanzas, culminating in a three-line envoi. (Poets.org, Glossary, n.d.)

In this fifth poem, Tito's experiment with structure continues, as he constructs this highly complex and mature poem. But what becomes the centre of my attention is not the craft but the subject matter of the poem. Here, the poet seems to use his power of empathy and reach out to the stories of others. Others, who are less privileged than him in many ways. It also seems an exercise in memory recreation since the slum painted in the poetry seems like a place he would have encountered in India, a country he left at the age of thirteen.

How deep or real was this interaction is difficult to say. This poem brings out the limitations of telling a story which are not made up of lived experiences. While in the rest of the poems, Tito is clearly trying to show something, create a visual through his words, in this poem Tito 'tells more than he shows'.

It tries to paint a picture of slums, of hunger, of homelessness, of little boys with no one to take care of them. But it does it from such a distance that everything is made to look gloomy. In this portrayal of a slum, you are almost reminded of ill researched articles on India which is based on the projected idea of a slum rather than what it stands for.

A city slum also stands as an epitome for the will of the people to survive. It stands for rebellion. It stands for people using their skills to make a living. Within all the gloominess,

there is always hope and happiness, like anywhere else. It seems that the picture in Tito's head is very monochromatic.

The idea of dogs continuously chasing boys, chasing them away almost also seems to stem from the poet's own fears. Dogs also become friends of boys from the slums who feed them leftover food. There are alternative imaginations available. But since there is so much that the poet is trying to tell us, almost presenting them as facts, it becomes hard to imagine things sometimes.

However, the fact that the poet reaches out and turns his empathy into words makes it clear that it is also a political statement against inequality, deprivation and the othering of the poor in the cities.

The poem almost seems to embark on a dystopic journey at times. 'Food sometimes appeared in the city/ In begging bowls coloured with dust'. This picture of helpless, begging city children somehow takes a grip over this poem. It is true that the best kind of poetry of this type comes from lived experiences, but the poet here is successful in showing us a control over expressions that reach out and touch the lives of others.

Conclusion

These five poems by Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay give us a glimpse into the talented poet's craft and his life. His use of diverse poetic forms to build visual images of words for the readers, the rhythm of his poetry, their layered construct, all make his poetry memorable and noteworthy.

Poetry carries the reflection of the poet. Tito's poetry finds meaning in patterns and assimilates into the patterns of his own life. Through his words, we travel through spaces which he occupies, and which find a space into his head. A stained teacup, a group of birds on electric cables, the scrambled sun, the purple sky, the hungry boys on the street. These varied images highlight the depth of his imagination and his ability to capture them in words.

Through his poetry, he is reclaiming space. He is questioning the society for deeming him 'unfit' because of his autism. He relates more to nature, the sun, the birds, and even the inanimate than people who stare at him questioningly. In fact, Tito's poetry breaks more rules of the normative society directly or indirectly, destroying all the questions on ability that is often posed for persons with disabilities.

His disability in no way becomes an impediment in his writing. In fact, as he shows through his villanelles, when he finds a form that matches the rhythm in his head, words and images seem to complement each other. Repetition and patterns become part of his craft and reflect the beauty of his mind.

I found the third poem to be visually similar to the second one, although it is still a well-crafted poem. The last poem seems to be written for an audience for whom poverty and

hunger has a stereotypical image, the one that promotes the idea of giving and to be fair Tito does justice to that. But as someone who shows immense depth while examining the self and the world around him, one starts to expect him to display the same insight when he reaches out. However, Tito is a poet first and foremost, and here in this poem he is showing us his dexterity with a complex form.

Tito's body of work at this young age is remarkable. It is also extremely valuable as far as representation of persons of autism is concerned. As a person with severe autism, Tito breaks many barriers by not only writing well but by also telling his stories, the stories of his body and mind, a narrative that has been missing from much of the discourse on autism especially in India. Most narratives on Autism in India are by parents or caretakers, leaving a void for embodied experiences. Tito's work might inspire people not only to write but to speak about their experiences through not only poetry but different forms of art.

Disability art is sometimes considered a sub - category of art where everything is looked at in the context of disability. That sometimes does injustice to the work of the artist. Tito's layered, visual and beautifully crafted poems do not deserve to be side lined as work written in some sub-category of poetry. Instead it should be celebrated by all lovers of poetry as an important body of work, something that stands out all by itself and yet lends a richness that 'fits' into any discourse on autism and disability.

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