

# A FRESH CLEAR VOICE

A Review of "Echoes of my other self", by Shabbir Banoobhai. Ravan Press.

by Colin Gardner

This seems to be a pretty good time and place for poetry (South Africa in the 70's and 80's is not asleep, whatever else it may be); and it is a pleasure to salute Shabbir Banoobhai as a most promising and indeed accomplished newcomer to the poetic scene. One had come across a number of his poems in various journals, but they had for some reason not led one to expect anything as quietly powerful and impressive as "Echoes of my other self".

The volume contains pieces on a variety of themes – religious poems, love poems, philosophical poems, poems of social and political concern. Through all of them one senses the poet's personality – sensitive, meditative, scrupulous, passionate, humane. The poems are striking for their simple directness, their imaginative delicacy, their limpid and confident movement.

Readers of Reality (at least in their capacity as readers of this journal) will be concerned especially with the poems dealing with South African society; but it is important to realize that the social poems come from the pen which produced a religious poem like this:

god is ecstatic heart  
and i  
his wild, wild pulse

and a love poem like this:

in each you  
you model before me  
every day  
i see  
beyond the chameleon of your never self  
now green against my growing happiness  
now brown against the dull twig of my sorrow  
the still you  
longing  
to lose yourself  
in my whoever me

Banoobhai's apprehension of society and its pains and injustices is grounded, then, in an impassioned sense of the possibilities of human expansion and human relationships. It bursts out, for example, in the strong but complex poem addressed to Fatima (Fatima Meer, who is banned), the opening stanzas of which are:

they have taken you away  
and left you untouched  
they have locked you up  
and set you free  
they have silenced your voice  
and proclaimed your message

i raked rock with my fingers  
battered my head to bone  
for a long time lay senseless  
heart shocked to stone  
then the words of the Quran  
stirred within me  
i breathed again  
knowing you were safe . . .

One of the most memorable of Banoobhai's poems about society – memorable partly because it is both personal and impersonal, both sensually alert and politically intelligent – is this:

god, please . . .

do not let them turn me into a shop  
to be opened at six in the morning  
and closed at six in the evening  
regulated in the thoughts i may  
and may not display  
advised on who i may  
and may not welcome  
in the sovereign territory of my being

remember that i've tried  
to keep my books of account  
as you've asked me to  
crediting the right  
and criticising the wrong  
diligently, faithfully  
honestly

because i know no other way

call back these self-appointed auditors  
of my soul  
who have declared me insolvent  
and have condemned me  
to a work-house  
where i shall be fed  
impoverished thoughts  
for the best years of my life

god, please . . .

These lines crystallize with a lovely religious clarity the blasphemy involved in the attempt by any human agency to regulate the real workings of a person's intimate existence. The utterance is so direct, so precise, that it is difficult to comment on it: the poet's words and rhythms move through the mind like an arrow, hitting crisply the target of one's response.

The volume includes one long poem, a fine meditation addressed to Muhammad Iqbal (1873–1938), the Islamic poet and philosopher. In this poem all of Shabbir Banoobhai's themes are woven together. I conclude by quoting one of its fourteen stanzas:

We have lost the straight path  
Rather we chose not to follow it  
We prefer the narrow circle  
Of never-ending passiveness  
We would rather crawl than walk  
Rather let the fire burn out  
Than rub together the flints of struggle and pain  
To produce the life-giving spark  
Rather fade like flowers in the heat  
Then set fire to ourselves  
And consume that which would consume us  
We would rather be ash than fire. □