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Decoding Foreign Dreams

in Book Review — by Sarita Jenamani — May 19, 2020

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Book Review of A Dictionary Of Foreign Dreams by Slovakian Poet Pavol Janik by Sarita Jenamani

Fall of Berlin Wall thirty years ago had marked the end of an era in the European history: the division between capitalist West and the satellite states of Russia, that is, the East Europe. The cold war and the iron curtain had pushed the entire East Europe into obscurity. On both sides of this divided world narratives of East vs West were quite black and white, however, still a number of writers from East Europe like Milan Kundera, Bruno Schulz, Bohumil Hrabal, Danilo Kiš, Ismail Kadaré, Nobel Lauret Herta Müller, Ágota Kristóf, László Krasznahorkai, Czesław Miłosz, Zbigniew Herbert had secured their place in the world literature, but unfortunately voices of many poets and their work still remain hidden from Anglophone readership.

Apart from its marvelous creative innovations, literature of this period is significant also because it provides a parallel and more insightful perspective on the politico-cultural landscape of the twentieth-century Europe. This part of the world, the so-called East-European region, is, however, more of a psycho-geographical concept and an imagined construct of the cold war. It represents a peculiar constellation of micro-regions, an amazing amalgamation of cultures, languages and tradition that are highly different from each other.

Slovakia, among the West Slavic group of nations, is the least-known country and this holds also true of its poetry. The reasons are mainly historical. The Slovak nation dates its establishment to the ninth-century Moravian Empire that included the territory of the former Czechoslovakia, southern Poland, parts of Austria, and parts of Hungary. In tenth century, the Moravian Empire was defeated by the Magyars (the Hungarians), and Slovakia became a part of the Kingdom of Hungary, afterwards it was a part of the Austrian Empire and in the wake of the Second World War it went under the influence of USSR.



The Modern Period of Slovakian literature has been shaped on one hand by the increasing influence of foreign literary trends, well as by the ideological influence of the former Soviet Union. However, you can find here, as in many parts of the East Europe, a place of unexpected cosmopolitanism that lies buried away from the view of Anglophone readership.

Slovakian poet, dramatist, prose writer, translator, publicist Pavol Janik is a typical example of this phenomenon, a wonderful voice from the little country Slovakia who seems to find its place beyond its border.

His book *The Dictionary of Foreign Dreams* is a collection of his poems in English translation. This poetry speaks of ordinary and mundane with an extraordinary poetic twist. It has a strong sense of regionalism yet at the same time it appeals to the readers who are not familiar to it. The opening poem of the book: 'I am carrying you, morning' written in 1975 paints a perfect landscape of desperation and hope.

Behind the horizon the light is spraying.

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The sky trembles like a tear.
The winged summer wilts.
Through the algae's lonesome dew slides.
 .
Trees hold empty nests in their hands.
I quietly sing birds psalms.
In the empty night, empty star is falling.
Empty gaze of water is still cloudy.
 .
I read an exclamation of silence

and drink the morning blood stream aloud.

The morning is taking deep breaths.

The peculiar phenomenon of the East European confusion of identities that somehow binds these countries is also reflected in the lines of his poem, 'The report from the end of the cold war'.

How much is the Czechoslovak crown worth here

in the capital of the ugliest women in the world

where the only chance for survivor

is your photograph?

.

An English poet,

who thinks that Bratislava is in Yugoslavia,

but knows that Dubcek lives there,

is only interested if Havel is free.

His rhymes, inspired by London and by other such European cities written about the size and dimensions of his desk could as well stayed on his noble table. He seems to be a poet who is gifted with the talent of or propensity to getting extraordinary poetic experience from ordinary things. Putting in other words, his is poetry concerned with enlivening the ordinary. Existential notions of nothingness and authenticity are explored here as they pertain to a poetics of the mundane. His poem 'Bad Habit' provides a telling proof of this tendency.

Every day

I go to work

for my wife, Olga,

so she has enough for shopping.

.

I must make an effort.

The weekend approaches

and the children would like to eat on Sunday.

We still have not succeeded

in breaking this bad habit.

.

The poem 'At the table' portrays this phenomenon in a different way.

.

An infirmary of flowers of the field

in a vase.

So many of the white

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Sarita Jenamani

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that the blood inside our veins stiffens.

.

Thus we wither together

torn away from

life.

Some of Pavol's poems are written with the acumen and approach of a cinematographer. Pavol, a dramatist, a keen observer, purposefully juxtaposes images and here a combination of theater language and specialized reading experience is made accessible in an adroit fashion that takes his poetry to new level of specificity and concentration; the subject fades away, allowing the poetic record to speak on its behalf. As the poem "summer" shows us:

The sun smashes our windows.

An urgent song reaches us from the street.

.

On the cellophane sky

steam condenses.

Unconfirmed reports are reproduced

about the wind.

.

The trees are the first to begin to talk

about the two of us.

At times the poet appears to be offering life in a way that is combined with humor and the self-irony: humorously, his poetry asks questions about the dark unspoken conditions that rule our world – a world where we knowingly or unknowingly follow the set rules without asking their relevance and this is a juncture where a writer should make his/her readers aware of this uncanny game. In his poem "New York" he writes:

Where does the empire of glass and marble reach?

Where do the slim rackets of the skyscrapers aim?

.

God buys a hot dog

at the bottom of a sixty-storey street.

.

God is a black

and loves the grey colour of concrete.

.

His son was born from himself

in a paper box

from the newest sort of slave.

Pavol Janik is a widely published poet whose literary works have been published not only in home country, Slovakia, but also in a number of other countries, and it is indeed solacing to know that such powerful voices are not getting lost behind an imagined iron curtain but finding their due space in global literary field.

The poem that gives the books its title 'A Dictionary Of Foreign Dreams' opens up with a dream as well as with a little sense of confusion over the vastness of this globe.

At the beginning it was like a dream.

She said:

"Have at least one dream with me.

You'll see – it'll be a dream

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which you’ve never dreamt about before.”

*Descend deeper with me,
dream from the back,
dream retrospectively
in a labyrinth of mirrors
which leads nowhere.*

A *Dictionary Of Foreign Dreams* is a wonderful poetry collection that not only provides you a sneak peek of Pavol Janik’s poetry in particular and Slovakian poetry in general but also leaves you craving for more such poetry.

Sarita Jenamani is a poet of Indian origin based in Austria, a literary translator, anthologist, and editor of a bilingual magazine for migrant literature – *Words & Worlds* – a human rights activist, a feminist and general secretary of PEN International’s Austrian chapter. She has three collections of poetry. She writes in English, Odia and translates to and from German. Sarita translated *Rose Ausländer*, a leading Austrian poet, and an anthology of contemporary Austrian Poetry from German into Hindi and Odia. She has received many literary fellowships in Germany and in Austria including those of the prestigious organizations of ‘Heinrich Böll Foundation’ and ‘Künstlerdorf Schöppingen’. She studied Economics and Management Studies in India and Austria where she works as a marketing manager.

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