

1988

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Four Poems by Mohan Koirala

Translated by Michael Hutt

Mohan Koirālā (b. 1926) is arguably the most significant poet to have appeared on the literary scene in Kathmandu since the mahākavi, Lakshmīprasād Devkoṭā. He has been active on the literary scene in Kathmandu for over forty years, and his craft continues to evolve and change. I first met Koirālā in 1987, and spent a considerable amount of time in consultation with him at his home in Dilli Bazaar during the summer of 1988. These poems were translated with the poet's guidance, and Koirālā also went to some lengths to explain the allusions they contain. Although Koirālā's poetry is often dense, and sometimes extremely difficult, I therefore believe that I can claim a high degree of authenticity for these translations.

The four poems translated here are drawn from an anthology of Nepali poetry in English translation which I completed in 1988, but which is as yet unpublished. These are some of Koirālā's earliest compositions, and I have selected them for the references they contain to the political circumstances which pertained in Nepal during the 1950s. The literary portrayal of social and political change in Nepal is an aspect of her history which has received scant attention from foreign scholars to date. Clearly, these poems are not representative of Koirālā's work as a whole, since they were drawn from his first collection (Mohan Koirālākā Kavita, Kathmandu, 1973), and five further volumes of Koirālā's verse have been published since then. Yet I hope that they will be of interest to lovers of literature and students of Nepali history alike.

* * *

An Introduction to the Land

First published in Shāradā volume 17 nos. 2-3 in B.S. 2008 (A.D.1951, but written at least one year earlier). Original title Deshko Parichaya. The poem describes Nepal on the eve of the Rana regime's downfall. The "auspicious time" in the first verse is a translation of the word sāit, a time fixed by astrologers for a bride to leave her home on the day of her wedding. Here, the sāit also represents the auspicious time for democracy to be established in Nepal. The kumārī, the so-called "living goddess," presents a garland of flowers to the king during the annual festival of Indra Jātrā. In 1950, this festival presaged the series of political events which toppled the Ranas.

*This is the first bell, and this is the first voice,
to our duties we are called
as the orchids flower on the precipice;
once the kumari has shared out the garlands,
every day will be the auspicious time:
very soon the light will come
on a golden morning.*

*When the sun has rubbed vermilion
into the blessed mountain's hair
Spring-time hills delight in their scent;
eyes drink in the scene to the music of birdsong,
every day there is a wedding:
very soon the light will come
on a golden morning.*

*Oh night-extinguishing light!
In night's dark obscurity
birds have pecked up their food
from the pavements of the Asan markets,
and now dawn's sun is rising
from a new day's wings,
washing the dirty streets clean:
very soon the light will come
on a golden morning.*

*Rising from the northern sea,
the moon swells over a crooked hill,
dressed in her widow's attire;
bushes and trees sway in the wind,
light and shade are playing, dancing,
rivershores glisten, the whole night is still:
very soon the light will come
on a golden morning.*

*An owl is weeping with open wings
from its roost behind the cremation-ground,
another adds his song in fragments:
"in what soil grows the lotus now?
From which bough sings the nightingale?
In which forest do the peacocks dance?
On what green plain will those eyes open,
which sleep now in deep emotion?"*

*Twisting its body, night attacks me,
black fangs glistening, it readies itself,
its arms are outstretched: I beat a drum,
to declare that the world still meditates
and has yet to wake from its trance.
I picked up a firefly, held it up to the stars:
"It fears no one, it glows and dims,
it dims and glows, of its own accord,
Light, oh Light!" I cried,
and the eastern sky reddens:
very soon the light will come
on a golden morning.*

*The moonbird calls out to make me restless,
I stride out - the sound of voices is far away,
and the river sleeps between us;
it has rushed and roared,
washing vermillion from the Himalaya's hair.
Without the human hustle and bustle
which drags me along with this country's dreams
or knocks me up with its awakened martyrs,
my country grows cold
in a shroud of clouds.*

*The sun hides under my pillow
and appears around midday,
when sunshine melts into the snow,
warming the hillsides, re-opening every door:
very soon the light will come
on a golden morning.*

* * *

I Love Your Daughter

First published in Pragati vol. 2/3, in B.S.2011 (A.D. 1954). Original title Ma Timro Chorilāi Prem Garchu. The meaning of the poem is open to interpretation. On one level, it is considered to be a expression of love for rural womanhood, on another, a yearning for the advent of a new era in Nepal.

*Oh blue reflection on an unstained rock,
you do not know how I love your daughter,
who darts behind green shrubs when she sees you,
who is startled when you find her alone.*

*When I love your daughter
it is a sweatstain, a smile that I love,
and cheeks that are coloured by toil,
I love the girl weary from breaking clods,
tired from working on the soil,
who stands now in the neem tree's shade,
coming into the first shadows of youth;
I love your budding flower, I love that girl.*

*I am setting out with axe and sickle,
seeking wood for a boat,
with hammer and chisel to look for a millstone,
with a bow and some pegs to divert a stream,
you will see me nearby scraping a plough,
carving a image,
digging a channel;
I am proud, I stroke my moustache.*

*Oh man, the first to plough the deserts,
the first to adorn its furrows with green;
if shoots should wither, we revive them with sweat,
if rocks block soft shoots, we remove them with hoes,
if wounds strike our crops, we heal them with kisses,
if pests eat soft buds we crush them with tongs;
with one ear of corn we will build the whole field,
then we will embrace this world!*

*We have a boon for our untiring souls,
before us the seasons bow their heads,
and we are fortunate:
the clods of our soil are safer
than a soul wrapped in cotton-wool.
Oh man, I am he
who makes Fate himself with his axe,
then cleans and carves and paints it,
who creates his own fortune himself:
how we long for sturdy arms,
a pure sweet manner, and sweet fat bread,
how fervently we desire
dominion over free soil.*

*Is it a sin to love?
We love each other,
we sow love in the soil,
and make it grow in our hearts,
we raise up our children from the ground,
we dust them down and kiss them;
I love your daughter.*

* * *

The Martyrs

First published in Shāradā vol. 20 no.5, B.S.2012 (A.D. 1955). Original title Shahīd. The poem expresses Koirālā's anger at the execution of members of the Prajā Parishad political party in 1941, and his detestation of Jang Bahādur's political legacy. The two final verses refer to a statue of Jang Bahadur which stands on the Tuṇḍikhel parade-ground in Kathmandu. Jang is shown mounted on a rearing horse, and looking back in an imperious manner. Koirālā compares his steed to the people of Nepal.

*A January night-
footprints deserted on an empty street,
a vulture is perched on top of a tree,
tightly folding its wings,
and a demoness opens the gates of the jail.
The Bīshnumati waits, its bosom swells,
a fainting engine disturbs the air,
jackals dig into the earth,
and at Pachalī Bhairava a corpse is burning.*

*I saw them there,
pointing a gun at the martyrs,
pulling them round with a rope
on the orders of the demoness Darkness
who has shaken the hearts of this land and its mothers;
I watch from eyes like two imminent bullets,*

*We cried out: stop, you butchers!
they have not stolen your shame and servitude,
they have not taken your malice and envy,
they have not robbed you of hunger and hate,
they have tried to fill your eyes with joy;
such great men of the future
must not set like the sun tonight,
stop, you butchers, stop!*

*The martyrs were speaking
to beloved friends, who had forgotten
their pleasant words and noble ways.*

*The martyrs were speaking.
But they have died already.
I make the picture clear,
I wash the dusty ground with water,
with pain in my heart I show you a picture
drawn with the blood of the sun's red light:
a picture of leaves kissing the sun's rays,
and eyes kissing the moon,
and I turn the page to another history.*

*In that cell there are still bloodied martyrs:
the picture has an ancient frame,
made from the soft bones of Jang Bahādur's massacres;
the horse received a lovely statue,
the warrior a well-trained horse;
when he spurred it on and tightened its reins,
he crushed the heart of many a woman,
trampled the playground of many a child,
he washed the vermillion from their hair.*

*He who turned back to look down
made the whips fly through the air;
he crossed both rivers and flames
and now fills the land with corpses
and the stench of dead memories.
There we find the rising walls of a funeral ground,
a pyre burning down to its ashes,
someone killing,
someone dying.*

* * *

I Remember

First published in Indrenī, vol.1, no.5, B.S.2013 (A.D. 1956). Original title Ma Samjhanchu. The poem contains references to the desire for political change which became a powerful force during Koirālā's youth. This is represented by symbols such as "the snail which is trying to climb up into another hemisphere", or the travellers who whistle for a boatman to take them across a river. The "serpent's coils" in the fourth verse are those of the comic serpent Shesha Nāga, upon which the famous image of Viṣṇu rests after completing the creation of the universe.

*Spring wakes up in secret
to kiss the malodorous soil
on the sturdy hills of this land
and on its strong white islands:
winter had just undone their belts,
winter had just laid bear their bodices;
and on the ochre cliffs
and the rush of blue rivers
it seems a snail is trying to climb
up into another hemisphere;
as a caterpillar lopes down a bough,
I remember, I was born just now.*

*The sky was always vast and fearsome,
the horizon always grand and broad;
I peered out from my mother's breast,
travellers whistled from the near rivershore,
travellers whistled from the far rivershore,
fishermen came out with their oars,
fisherwomen came out with their oars;
travellers whistled from this side and that
and in the middle a boulder
was toppling in the waves:
I feel I was born just now.*

*As gifts on the day of my birth,
my loving mother gave out (and all to me),
teeth to the toothless, claws to the weak,
bones to the maimed, limbs to the crippled,
fingers to duty and roads to my legs.
There I clenched my fists and made my choice,
there I clenched my fists and made my resolution,
I feel I was born just now.*

*My mother's eyes lustrous and brightened by love,
her puckered lips, her kisses and smiles,
cheeks wrinkled by health and the warmth of her love;
I gambolled in rags like a small unwise lord
on the soil of the serpent's coils.
My delicate bud of desire was drenched
by the sweet sherbet of an ocean of milk,
my breast by the sweat of unfathomed love,
when I cried out, striking and rocking
the earth which was my cradle,
my mother came rushing with wings,
like the sky swooping down with eagles,
and I feel I was born just now.*

* * *