



When Whistles Melt into Beeps: Four Poems for AutoEthnographer

Description

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Author's Memo

I approach poetry as a vessel to preserve the contemporary. As a poet and academic in India, a country with a legacy of cultural diversity, it is hard not to respond to the politics of every day. Poetry, as Billy Collins said, 'honours subjectivity and interiority.'* Poetry is personal. However, that alone cannot be the creative threshold for a poet— a monkish soul typing away in an ivory tower. The poet is also a public intellectual; one who is out there to interrogate, to seek, to preserve the fabric of human culture.

I see poetry as a form of ethnic mooring; 'a way of life,' as theorised by Raymond Williams. To me culture is 'ordinary;' an idea of 'lived reality' of a 'place,' 'space' and 'experience' as articulated by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, and intellectuals like Jurgen Habermas, Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall.

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In my poems, I revisit personal experiences and read them in the broader social, political, and cultural, context. The poems explore the traditional and popular Bengali ('Paayesh,' 'Paan,') and Telugu ('Mirchi Bhajji,' 'Pappu Charu') culture of eating—in times when food seems to have become a source of

instant gratification. I might appear as a nostalgist and even an idealist as I helplessly watch our hyper-consumptive digital habits, insistence on individualism and structured apathy towards climate change, control the experiential value of food. I do not intend to weigh and balance the cultural superiority of one over the other; but it is as if I become a chronicler of ancestral gastronomic knowledge, lest we forget the truths passed down to us by our mothers and grandmothers.

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My second collection of poems, '[Noise Cancellation](#),' responds to the changing discursive patterns around cultural practices. My published poems like '[Aloo Posto](#),' explore the colonial history of opium— while I narrate the simple act of my mother cooking the dish in our traditional kitchen. '[Sari](#)' also nominated for the Nina Riggs Poetry Award, 2023 interweaves a child's wonder at the wet sari of the mother soaking the afternoon sun— the sari being the representative of Indian fabrics and weavers. The poem '[I ran the marathon without shoes](#),' laments the loss of emotional connection between teachers and students during Covid-19 — again inspired by my academic experiences. Some other poems would be 'My hair won't cry,' Room, Issue 43.1, Canada; it perceives hair as a symbol of gender difference during a Hindu funeral ceremony.

I hope the poems delight you. They are premised on my private emotions but attempt to connect to the larger ethnographic context. Poems cannot stop the change and poets cannot simply wait with hands akimbo — poets seek an anchorage. Poets like barometers preserve and measure the mutating flow of culture.

[*Billy Collins on finding your voice – Excellent Journey](#)





By Camille Brodard for Unsplash

Paan

Each noon, after rice and fish,
Thamma* opened her brass box.

A green, glistening, heart-shaped,
Paan leaf from folds of a moist red cloth

was torn into two —
daubed with choon, *khoir*, gulkhand*,

sprinkled with betel nuts,
they swirled up in cones —

one for her; one for me.
A sweet beginning to fibrous friendships.

Silently, we would chew and spit.
Rusty-red juices of a leaf

that once announced Thamma's marriage —
from a village to a colliery town.

Later, the leaf fell on my face,
assuring that Paan was not a dessert—

a doll-digestive — destined to dance
to the rhythms of global cuisines:

paan shot, paan ice cream,
paan pudding, paan chocolate.

Paan permutations
rumble in modern bellies —

a game of relocations;
chopped and moulded

into the desired silhouette
of the human tongue.

*Paan: Betel Leaf. *Thamma (Bangla): Grandmother. *Choon (Bangla): Lime.
*Khoir (Bangla): Catechu Plant extracts *Gulkhand: a sweet mouth freshener made of rose petals.

Paayesh

Birthsongs of Bengalis
never break upon a cake.

We are born in silver bowls of paayesh*,
stubbornly, lovingly — made by mothers.

Short-grain rice boils in full-fat milk —
sweetened by sugar or jaggery.

Later, unrushed to a cool, starchy,
pearly, often a tawny saccharine pleasure.

Ma always made paayesh.
Her rare conversation with slowness.

The old kitchen throbbing to her agile ways,
morning-hustle reduced to a constant stir

until soft little rice pillows occupied the metal arcs;
moony as marbles of the Taj Mahal.

After mutton curry and greasy brinjal fry,
cool whiteness smoothened the belly's rage.

Now, in a digital universe,
Apps bake a screen full of cakes —

'gluten-free' 'sugar-free'
mother's-love free.

*Paayesh (Bangla): A dessert with a pudding-like consistency. It is made of rice and milk and garnished with raisins and nuts of choice.

Mirchi Bhajji*

Famished streetlings
watch the smooth cleansing of hot intestines —
a crunchy green chilli,
bathed in tamarind water,
gently drops into a wallop of besan*
and then as if to meet the call of witches,
it plunges into a cauldron of oil.
In the parliament of chillies,
seeds explode like angry ministers.
Stains of emerald-green
mark the migrant vendor,
his pungency melts into the grease
of a cool rain-washed evening.
He labours to stir and design
a burning aftertaste —
something to accord
the lamentations of poor farmers*,
“these peppers are born of a gasping earth,
without water, there is no fire”,
Heatless chillies
do not make us cry anymore —
they only thicken the body’s costume.

*Mirchi Bhajji (Hindi): chilli fritter

*Besan: chick-pea flour

*Poor Farmer

Pappu Charu*

There are days
when bones
carry the exhaustion
of a brisk mother.
The kitchen barely

provides for the night—
yet hands endure
the birth of a decent meal.
The sparse plateau of the table
holds rice, pappu charu and three omelettes.
Onion, tomatoes, moringa sticks
float in the translucence of a lentil stew.
Healing begins with warm grains
chewed and slurped in minutes.
This was my ship back home;
a dignified homage
to the labour of men and women
who raised me.
Sleep comes soon
on weary shoulders.
As I lick my palms
for the final drop
of warm, tangy, juices,
the charu is assured —
next Monday or Tuesday,
it will be summoned again.

*Pappu Charu (Telugu) : A lentil stew with vegetables

Credits

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The AutoEthnographer