

Bridging the Gulf: A Critique Rajiv Khandelwals,' *Conch Shells and Cowries* Reference: Love Poem, 'Word'

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ABSTRACT

As an unconventional and innovative poet in contemporary modern Indian Writings in English, Khandelwal's *Conch Shells and Cowries*, his first Anthology, holds him apart from other present-day writers. In appending such a title to his anthology of love poems, Khandelwal has rationally developed a unique style of his own. His poem 'Word', and others in the anthology are not only cloaked in numerous symbols and other figures of speech but are also innovative in their unique structure, form and content. In this manner, he has paved the path for a new concept of writing in expressing his 'love thoughts,' pertinently in singular pounding words that nail him as an innovative poet of the 21st century. Khandelwal has thus, effectively established the trend for post-modernist, futuristic poetry in the realm of Indian Writings in English for which he deserves recognition as an eminent poet.

Keywords: *Conch Shells, Cowries, Sappho, contemporary, imagery.*

Wrapped up in his cocooned world of enterprising ventures, Khandelwal's first published book of poems, *Conch Shells and Cowries* drew some Indian critics like Som P. Ramchan, the famous poet's attention, who wrote in the Forward of the Anthology, "Rajiv's volume begins with Love poems. The emotion is romantic but is filtered through contemporary sensibility, self-conscious, introspective, tortured even, and open to irony and even self-parody shot with carry-over or adolescent sexuality." (Khandelwal vii)

Writing poetry about love, is not a new art form; since times immemorial, poets have dealt with the subject and written hundreds, nay, innumerable poems on love. Whether the "Greeks, the Romans, Egyptians, the ancient Arabs and Persians, the Maya and Inca civilization," and India, all over the world in various civilizations and cultures, there have been writers of love poetry like the Greek poet "Asclepiads (4th century BCE), Sappho (600 BCE), Philodemus (110-30 BCE). Latin poets like Sulpicia (1st century BCE), and, Catullus (c 84-c54 BCE)."

The British poet-dramatist Shakespeare, Metaphysical poets like Donne and Andrew Marvel, and Romantic poets Robert Burns, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, among many others, have relentlessly explored love angles and composed innumerable love poems. For American writers of the past or the present like Edgar Allan Poe, Whitman, Robert Frost, T.S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, E.E. Cummings, Federico Garcia, Sara Teasdale, Jean Toomer and

William Carlos Williams, Emily Dickinson, and hosts of other poets, love has always been the most desired subject upon which to write. Love uplifts the spirit and ushers pleasure to a person's urge to love and beget love. (htt)

The Indian Rig Vedas, Vatsayayan's Kama Sutra, Kalidasa's Malvika Agnimitra, Shakuntala, Malvika Agnimitra, Meghadoot, the "Gita Govinda composed by the 12th century Hindu poet Jayadev," albeit it depicts the love between Krishna and Radha as such, a spiritual work, are all worked on the principle of love.

A host of Indian writers like "Pritish Nandy," "Subhash Saha," "Arvind Krishna Mehrotra," "R. Parthasarthy's, 'Erotic Poems from the Sanskrit:

An Anthology,'" and "Amrita Narayan's, 'Parrots of Desire,'" have deeply dealt and written on the various aspects of love experienced from the spiritual to the erotic.

It is interesting to comprehend the various types of love on which poets resort in writing love poetry. Greek philosophy mentions six varieties of love, "Eros (sexual passion), philia (platonic love), luscious (playful affection), pragma (mature love), agape (selfless love), and philantia (self love)." Bharat Muni's Natya Shastra refers to passion or love as the "Sringara Rasa," which is divided into three aspects of love: The "Ayoga Sringara (unequal love filled with longing), Vipra Lamba Sringara (love in separation), and Sambhoga Sringara (love in sexual union)." The unity in Bharat Muni's "Sringara Rasa" and Greek "Eros" refers to the same aspect of love. Khandelwal, writing poetry about Love in this trend, is in tune with the art of love poetry since times immemorial.

As an unconventional and innovative poet in contemporary modern Indian Writings in English, Khandelwal's Conch Shells and Cowries, his first Anthology, holds him apart from other present-day writers like Pritish Nandy, who writes very openly about his love life, as witnessed in his poem, The Nowhere Man,

Come let us pretend this is a ritual. This in your hair, your tongue seeking mine this cataclysmic despair.... For when daybreak returns, we shall realize that forever means an empty room, a tired night swirling into nowhere.... (Nandy)

Khandelwal, in his poem 'Thirst' writes, "Desperately trying to look/ inconspicuous in the crowd /.../ and gazing intently wished /that the Crystal Ball/ had the power of transporting us/ into the garden of Eden / to taste the Forbidden Fruit.../..." likewise in the poem Word he writes, "I searched for you /.../ beneath the Kamasutra / on the heaving bed /..."

It is noticeably clear that the two poets adopt a style that remarkably differs in technique, lexicon and diction. However, the idea contained in both examples carries a similar meaning. Both poets use images and symbols but while Nandy writes in frank words about his passion, Khandelwal camouflages the ideas by resorting to the word Kamasutra. Yet, Khandelwal's condensed, terse parlance compared to Nandy's direct and straightforward articulation makes him stand apart because of his unconventional writing mode.

The poem Word substantially cynosures around the thumping agitating spirit of the poet hunting for his lost love (?) that keeps eluding him even though he pursues it like a shadow. (Remember, shadows also leave and betray). Incidentally, the title is unsupported by the Definite or the Indefinite article 'a' / 'the.' Still, it stands singularly all by itself, suggesting that the poet has opted for poetic license for "tonal requirement," or else the poet has deliberately avoided its use to hammer his ideas. It is important to observe that the poet has caustically used consonants to verb induce the poem define something more than what meets the eye. The poem is bereft of soft lyricism because it lacks vowels, but the second and third verses are alliterative by the use of words like 'willows,' 'leaves,' 'trees,' 'leaves,' 'meadows,' 'pleasures,' 'griefs,' where the words end with the syllable "s," which impart the verses a mellifluous tone. The poet's deliberate use of consonants unmask his tormented spirit at the loss of something or someone dear to his heart. The poet's intentional use of the verbs, "searched," "couldn't," "looked," "found," "rooted," signify a past event probably buried in the poet's psyche since long.

The first verse of the poem begins with the poet's personal investigation of someone lost and he writes, "I searched for you / in every corner / under the sofa / amongst the flowers/ in the Upanishads/ beneath the Kamasutra / on the heaving bed/ couldn't find." Logically, the lines are irrational. If a thing or article is lost, a person will hunt for it under a 'sofa' or amongst the 'flowers / flower beds,' but not in the 'Upanishads,' or "beneath the Kamasutra." Since the first line of the poem does not signify what or who the poet is searching for and the 'you' in the poem is ambiguously tantalizing for the reader to relate to, can it be that the poet is searching for his lost soul / his Alter Ego in the Upanishads that connotes eternal bliss?

However, the next lines, "beneath the Kamasutra," and "on the heaving bed," obliterate the above idea and it becomes evident that the poet is desperately exploring the (cause) of the desertion of his love. Thus, every symbol employed in the 'search' of the beloved has varied

overtones and compels the reader to read between the lines of the effortless, expressive end words that contain within them the essence of the poet's thought process.

In order to relate to Khandelwal's poem the reader must bear in mind what Emily Dickinson wrote long back, "I know nothing in the world that has as much POWER as a WORD. Sometimes I write one, and look at it, until it begins to SHINE." (5 Great American Poets to Know and Love) Taking this statement into consideration, Khandelwal's choice of diction, and the title of the poem WORD, solitarily appended, is highly significant as it acts as a signifier and depicts loneliness linked with the signified past tense verb 'searched.'

If the first verse is deconstructed, it exhibits the futile search of the subject "I" who refers to as the protagonist of the entire episode engaged in exploring all possible channels in quest for his love but which ends in a fruitless endeavour. Figuratively, what do the end words of each line suggest? An intensive reading of the poem creates awareness of the poet's loss and his mental agony highlighted sagaciously, tinged with complex symbols that create the atmosphere of obsessive defeat for the lover. These lines contextually integrate with the end words of the first stanza and connect with the last lines of the last verse where the poet is exasperated to find his lost lover "seduced," "amongst the pregnant cows."

The word "pregnant" hits the nail on the head and the realization disillusion him unreservedly and voiced pathetically in the lines, "I searched and searched / and then / at the end of the rainbow..." The metaphor of the 'rainbow end' destroys the poet's chimera and finally cappers his search for the so-called beloved, whom he probably thought belonged only to him or perhaps was his 'personal possession.'

However, even as the awareness crumbles his delusion and undergoes Catharsis, it also shatters and belittles the image of a 'woman' by stating that he finally discovered her "amongst the pregnant cows" ... "allowing yourself / to be seduced." Indirectly the sense conveyed is that the 'woman' did not resist seduction and of all the places, she chose the cowshed! The lines are derogatory and expose not only the poet's own frustrated image of the self but also his desperate urge to have been the one to seduce yet, like Shaw, evolves an iconoclast.

The first and the last verse coalesce artistically, amalgamating ideas, metaphors, similes, symbols, hyperbole, and transferred epithets, neatly blending them into the web of the poem as an organic whole. Thus, the "flowers," signify sprouting; 'eternal bliss' or 'spiritual contentment,' which the poet searches for in the "Upanishads," and sexual fulfilment in the

‘Kamasutra’ (used as a phallic symbol). The “heaving bed” reminds the poet of bygone days when the two lovers spent intimate time together. Therefore, all the end words of the verse symbolically devastate the poet’s optimism of discovering the whereabouts of the mysteriously absconding “you.” In the detached line, the “I” and “you” personal pronouns are explicitly omitted and simply read, “couldn’t find.”

The realization awakens the poet from his trance and crushes him to the core. The emotion, tersely defined appositely in “at the end of the rainbow,” dispels the gloom of his ‘futile search.’ The words “beneath...” and “heaving bed,” (Kamasutra book and bed both inanimate items), used as transferred epithets and projected with human attributes; “beneath,” and “heaving” denote ‘gasping’ and broadly suggest “moving up and down with large regular movements;” and “raising up and down with force.” The suggestively carved words subtly expose the poet’s frustration at the loss of bonding with his beloved; the anonymous “you” and the denial consequently end in Ayoga Sringar or Eros.

The second stanza of the poem demonstrates that the poet’s tone is placidly changed. He is no longer “searching” but is just “looking” or casually peering here and there “amongst the weeping willows / ... the violently shaking leaves / of the deeply rooted tall trees / amongst the leaves/ of the calm grass in meadows/ and also “Amongst the roaming clouds....” Has the poet deliberately set aside this solitary line from the rest of the verse? If so what purpose does it serve? Does it infer alienation?

The visual imagery is striking because the poet is now ‘looking’ for his love in various aspects of nature. His mind now diverted from abstract objects mentioned in the first stanza to concrete images in the physical world of senses. Initially the poet directs his gaze at the ‘weeping willows,’ a symbol of fertility that signifies new life. Since he does not find his ‘lost treasure’ there, he moves towards the ‘violently shaking leaves/ of the deeply rooted tall trees... / The lines depict the poet’s subterranean thoughts embedded in his consciousness, which he is unable to displace easily.

Thus, the metaphoric phrase ‘violently shaking leaves’ expose the poet’s panic at not finding his beloved in an ‘open space’ (it implies no one can hide in an open space)! He conveys a similar idea in the last lines ‘amongst the leaves / of the calm grass in meadows.’ However, these lines indicate a rift in relationship and connect with the ‘weeping willows’ and the ‘violently shaking leaves.’ The poet has deftly carved the contrast in the foregoing lines of the

verse. The ongoing phrase, ‘calm grass,’ implies serenity during happy times, while ‘in meadows’ (pasture) reveals courtship. Symbolically, the ‘meadow’ is grazing and thriving ground for animals, also a site for “pollinating insects.”

The lonesome line, “Amongst the roaming clouds,” evokes a poignant emotional reaction. The “roaming clouds” primarily suggest that a cloud is dense (impenetrable), therefore, cloaked in obscurity. It operates as a powerful metaphor in the human world and denotes obstacles, hence, represents the consciousness and “certain moods” of a person. The detached line mirrors the poet’s agitated spirit, alienation and loneliness carried forward by the word ‘roaming’ (no place to anchor). The diverse images act as stimuli in the poet’s mind at the “epiphany” and his consciousness spurs him into reverie, which is explicitly unwrapped and evoked sensitively in the third stanza.

The verse begins with sensory feelings as the poet delves into the past alliance and writes, “I could sense you /in my pleasures/ in my griefs / softly vibrating / in the quietness / of the storms raging outside / I couldn’t find.../”

The above lines reflect the emotional state of the poet as he recalls the stored associations and reconstructs the sensuous togetherness shared, whether in “pleasures” or “griefs,” the very thoughts which undulate the throbbing of his heart when in tranquil moments of his life. Notwithstanding, there is an ironic sting in the last three end words, where the poet writes about “softly vibrating,” “quietness,” and the “raging storm outside.”

Notice carefully that all three words have opposite meanings. While “vibrating” denotes quivering or trembling with fear or excitement, “quietness” refers to serenity, solitude or even composure (poise, self-control). Conversely, ‘the storms raging outside’ are always harsh and create uproar, turbulence, or chaos. The storm raging outside actually defines the internal friction of the poet’s agitated mind. The poet has, with his creative instinct, ingeniously merged his restlessness into antithesis statements. However, the lines have a lyrical and hissing finesse with the repetition of the syllable “s” which sustains the verse with an intricate, ironical unity.

The last verse wretchedly reveals the dejected spirit of the poet and his over strung, desperate state of mind. The repeated word in the line, ‘I searched and searched’ lays emphasis on the futility of the poet’s rigorous endeavor to locate the whereabouts of his love. In spite of the fact, that he has vainly investigated and explored every possible “place of concealment,” he draws a blank. The last search ends at the cowshed where the “pregnant cows” are secluded

from the milking ones, and is horrified to find her amongst them “allowing” one’s own self “to be seduced” under “suspicious circumstances.” The metaphor “at the end of the rainbow,” significantly refers to illusory promises that ‘marks the end of a story,’ although the word ‘rainbow,’ by itself signifies a new beginning; a symbol of ‘hope’ and promise.’

The poem thus captures the poet’s past, the present and the future and represents different moods, tensions and the shifting state of his mind. The poet has aptly displayed his profound knowledge in the use of appropriate forms of imagery in his subjective quest (first stanza); that exposes his bewildered and irrational state of mind. The powerful and flexible metaphors sharply convey the poet’s despondency at the loss of his ‘prized’ love. ‘Prized’ because the last stanza pungently exposes the hollow relationship between the two characters in fact, the ‘she’ camouflaged in obscurity with her disappearance and the search everywhere, enhances the ambiguity of the affair.

The visual imagery of nature infused with the physical world of man in the second stanza, mirrors the conscience of the poet and reveals how he is unable to accept the fact that his ‘love’ (?) has crudely deserted him. The question arises where the two characters wedded or was it love infatuation and lust that bonded them in an illicit, concealed, live-in relationship? It is a well-grounded point to ponder upon thematically. The image of the ‘roaming Clouds’ (note, the end word syllable ‘C’ is in caps), so is there any particular reason for the poet to do so? What is the purpose? Does it convey a hushed message? Is the poet struggling between Scylla and Charybdis? Is he projecting himself in the image of Odysseus?

The ‘roaming Clouds’ are highly symbolic; they not only expose the poet’s isolation from everything around him but also sharply depict that in ‘life, nothing is constant’ because it is always in flux and people, carried away by its flow in any direction. The stimulus is so strong that it clouds rationality and is explicit in the first stanza, where the poet’s rationality is merged with the irrational in his ‘detective’ search when alienated from his love.

G. Kirilenko & L. Korshunova writes how alienation creates barriers in the spiritual world of a person, which he tries to overcome in a ‘distorted form’ [...] ‘in the form of possession.’ “It is as if man looks in one or other “looking- glass” (...) and finds there his own image, and is frightened by them, not yet understanding that all of them are just images of himself. Like a curious animal, he constantly tries to look behind the looking – glass to see what is hidden

there...” (What Is Personality? Through the Labyrinths of Alienation, 108-09), the question again arises, is the poet searching for his own lost image, or his soul transformed as his love?

A glance at the poet’s complex use of opposites mystifies the reader; searched: couldn’t find, corner: sofa, flowers: Upanishads, Kamasutra: bed, in: beneath: on, weeping: violent, rooted: tall, deep: calm, leaves: grass, willows: trees, sense: pleasures: griefs, softly: raging, vibrating: quietness, storms: outside, pregnant: seduced, finally searched: found. Metaphorically, these words demand intense interpretation but are obscured and hence difficult to comprehend at one or two readings.

Although the poem appears very simple, it is not. On one hand, the title of the poem, Word, sounds bizarre to the reader and on the other hand, is mystified as to how the title of the anthology, Conch Shells and Cowries justifies and coordinates the two. Here, it becomes imperative to keep in mind that critics acclaim Khandelwal as a poet of Love, as he also acknowledges.

Almost all the poems penned circle around this sole angle, and the protagonist is always the poet himself and an unnamed damsel who catches his fancy in the rarest of circumstances. Unfortunately, the poet suffers stress because of unrequited love, as such, love for the poet is ephemeral, the moment he assumes that, he will gain fulfilment... the love object flees away from him. The question arises, is the word Love simply a transient feeling for the poet after which he is constantly running after, or does he seek permanence in love and feels betrayed each time the love slips off from his butter fingers? Why is the poet always the loser?

It is evident that the title of the Anthology is the result of careful deliberation. As per the Hindu myth, the Conch Shell is a sacred symbol of the Hindu God Vishnu, the preserver and the destroyer. It represents spirituality, perceived as feminine... the symbol of birth, good fortune and resurrection; also the cleanser of sin. In Buddhism, it represents one of the eight auspicious symbols known as Ashtamangla... an emblem of power, authority and sovereignty.

Cowrie is a symbol of fertility and is one of the first Yonic symbols the name of which originates from Kauri, a pre-Vedic Indian goddess that represents rebirth and the female Gate of Life. The Romans call it matriculates, which means little womb. (Cowrie) The African tribes refer to it as Fertility split or the Elixir of Life. (What Do Cowrie Shells Mean?)

In appending such a title to his anthology of love poems, Khandelwal has rationally developed a unique style of his own. His poem Word, and others in the anthology are not only cloaked in numerous symbols and other figures of speech but are also innovative in their unique structure, form and content. In this manner, he has paved the path for a new concept of writing in expressing his ‘love thoughts,’ pertinently in singular pounding words that nail him as an innovative poet of the 21st century. Khandelwal has thus, effectively established the trend for post-modernist, futuristic poetry in the realm of Indian Writings in English for which he deserves recognition as an eminent poet. It goes to the poet’s credit that despite being an engineer he has deftly honed his skill in the art of writing New Indian English Poetry and has proved himself to be well-read in the classical, mythological, ancient Indian texts and folklores of the world.

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