

# Do we still have dreams?

... .. By Somendra M Bhattacharjee

“Poetry is to be felt more than a prose” - that’s how a friend of mine introduced me to poetry in my early days. “Look at the arrangements of the words and the breaks; they are as important as the words.” The example given was from Pablo Neruda. That’s the first time I heard of Pablo Neruda. Well, I learnt Pablo Neruda is to be read not just for contents but also for its structure.

The example quoted is this:

Come and see the blood in the streets.  
Come and see  
The blood in the streets.  
Come and see the blood  
In the streets.

Same sentence repeated thrice but the breaks cannot be missed. No matter how we read it, the line breaks give vent to the hidden feelings of the poet - we the readers also get to share that - a feeling of anger and desperation. Above all, a dry sentence becomes a poetry.

This is a poem written during the 1936-39 Spanish civil war that led to the defeat of the liberals. The destructions and the death of his poet friend in bombing changed his outlook. With this poem “*I’m explaining a few things*”, a new era in poetry was born. Neruda, already a poet of the people for his love poems, shifted from being

a poet of individualistic concerns to a poet of more collective and broader contents:

And you'll ask: why doesn't his poetry  
speak of dreams and leaves  
and the great volcanoes of his native land?

Dreams transcended the sweet experiences with eyes closed to realizable goals in life. But that was the era when the fragrance of change was blowing in the wind. The social and political events created worldwide demands for change, or at least gave a right to dream of changes. Neruda lent the voice to that.

Around the same time, Bengali poetry was also feeling the urge for change. While the turmoil in Spain was going on, on the eastern side, Japanese armies were attacking and massacring the Chinese. The common sight of the soldiers seeking the blessing of Buddha for success in the killing spree resulted in a poem<sup>1</sup> in 1938

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<sup>1</sup>This is not a proper translation of the Bengali poem and let me leave it to the reader's guess who the poet could be.

The count of the injured and the wounded  
With beats and rhythms, would announce the victory  
The amputated limbs of children  
Would add pleasure in the satanic dances  
Heaps of lies would vitiate the trust of people  
Poison vapour would suffocate all  
    To fulfill this dream, they march with clenched fists  
    To bring Buddha to their side.  
The bugles are blown repeatedly in anger  
The earth cannot but tremble in fear.

Blessings of Buddha to win a brutal war? Even after more than sixty years, the world doesn't seem to be any different!

Neruda's voice emanated from the Chilean experience. But up in the north of that continent, a subdued race also started talking of dreams. Did Neruda influence them or is it that the time was ripe everywhere, Neruda or no Neruda? Langston Hughes in 1940's, a few years after Neruda's description of the destruction, talked of dreams:

## Harlem: A Dream Deferred

(italics by the poet)

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

May be it just sags

like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*

At the time the Americas were in turmoil, the African nations were also hoping for simple rights. A poem of Mozambique of 1950's:

## Dream of the black mother

(by Kalungano)

Black mother  
Rocks her son  
And in her black head  
Covered with black hair  
She keeps marvelous dreams.

Black mother  
Rocks her son  
And forgets  
That the earth has dried up the maize  
That yesterday the groundnuts were finished.

She dreams of marvelous worlds  
Where her son would go to school  
To school where men study.

Black mother  
Rocks her son  
And forgets  
Her brothers building towns and cities  
Cementing them with their blood.

She dreams of marvelous worlds  
Where her son would run along the street  
The street where men pass by.

Black mother  
Rocks her son  
And listens  
To the voice from afar  
Brought by the wind.  
  
She dreams of marvelous worlds  
Marvelous worlds  
Where her son will be able to live.

A dream that went beyond the immediate need of food and shelter but more than that. Was this dream affordable at that time, and by a person who first is a black and then a woman?

Whether the deferred dream actually exploded or the son got to live in a marvelous world remained a deep political issue. In reality, dreams seem to have taken a retreat. Very few events in the street would now excite a call to come and see, blood is so cheap. Instead, we got hooked to the marvelous images of bombs leveling cities and countries. Even over there, there's got to be a poet talking of the dreams of the people - Neruda can neither be alone nor an accident.

Towards the end of his life, Neruda still had the wish to talk of dreams

I came here to tell of the bells  
that live in the sea  
that dream of the sea  
within the sea.

Thus I live here.

Love poems remain evergreen over the ages - the pains and pangs of love are to stay with us for ever. Same with the poems of dreams?