

A THOUSAND-PETALLED GARLAND  
AND OTHER POEMS  
BY K L CHOWDHURY  
*Reviews*

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## *REVIEWS*

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## 1.0 REVIEW BY PROF. SOMNATH WAKHLU

### From the world of Poesy - A critical essay



Dr. K L Chowdhury is a physician by profession, a political leader and social activist by force of circumstances, writer and freelance journalist by choice and poet by the gift of Muse, the goddess of poetry and learning.

Milton's postulate that poetry should be simple, sensuous and passionate holds well even now. Great poetry is simple, as the elemental things of life are simple. It is sensuous, for its appeal is made through the senses (how else can rhythmic beauty be realized), it is passionate because it deals with the primal instincts. Dr. Chowdhury's poetry is replete with all these three attributes. He writes in a simple language. He is both sensuous and passionate, indeed superbly so. His appeal lies in his being a passionate singer of love, the agony of suffering and pain. His poetic stature derives from his psychological insight. While his is a masterly execution of the theme of love yet the mystic side of his romantic love and passion is suggested tenderly and wistfully in his poems.

The outpourings of love in his poems, the haunting thoughts of pain, loss, and the philosophic resignation to death are hard hitting. Dr. Chowdhury's poetry is accidental, transcendental and deeply in love with relationships. His personality evolves with his poetry, the best gold having been produced from the harshest fire. His two books of poetry are not only highly reflective of the socio-economic and political environment that we live in but also his philosophical and spiritual recipe with which to beat the existential crisis. It is a surge of ideas in cosmic play.

Dr. Chowdhury's poetic sensibility seems to evolve from the fragmentation of events in life, intruding into nature and his indomitable spirit to survive with dignity. His portrayal of love is not in form, it is all pervasive. The present book directs the course of life and feels the pain of too much tenderness. Chowdhury's poems truly unfold themselves like a garland of thousand petals.

#### Poems of love

The book is divided into three sections. The first section deals with love - simple, deep and intense but never libidinous or voluptuous. His Kashmiri blood is the source of his outstanding originality. To it he owes the intensity, the sensitivity and keenness of the sensations, feelings and expressions. Kashmiris are devoted to their beloved's, rather their spouses, and unaware of the apparent conflict of flesh and spirit, the attitude being one of ecstasy in the presence of a beloved, an emotion deep enough to offer the characteristics of religious worship. The passion is sublimated into a spiritual exaltation. It is not the love of Patriarch for Lou, it is that of Dante for Beatrice.

It is obvious from a psychological analysis of Chowdhury's poems that he has found a soul mate. One cannot find such intensity of feeling and expression of devotion unless it has passed the fire test of repeated cycles of births and deaths. There is a belief, based on the

law of incarnation that true lovers are reborn and reincarnated to meet again in different lives. This borders on the mystic, nay divine, love and is not unlike what Kahlil Gibran's narrates in his 'Ashes of the Ages and Eternal Fir' about Nathan, the high priest who is driven to distant wilderness when his beloved is snatched away from him by death in 116BC. But such is the strength of their eternal love that he is reborn as Ali El Hossoni in the year 1890 A.D and in a mysterious way reunited with his beloved, reborn in that age.

In his 'Metaphor of the Soul' Chowdhury adores his beloved to supernatural intensity:

*The fingers ache  
to pierce cyberspace,  
to send thoughts  
that have been bouncing back,  
to package the idiom of the soul,  
to open the breast Hanuman-like  
that my heart I may lay bare,  
for you to discover  
your own self  
woven into each strand and fiber.*

*Again in 'Alter Ego':  
but soon to realize  
that it is not a dreamy aberration,  
the transmutation  
of the object of my supreme devotion  
but her alter ego,  
and my alter love*

In the poem 'The Magic of distance' the home is for him a temple in which resides the Angel of love and to whose magnetic touch he is drawn. The vehemence of emotion has stirred such mastery in the poet that it is the spirit addressing the spirit:

*'The more distant you may seem,  
the stronger your presence,  
and the nearer to you I manage to be.  
For distance does generate  
an acute awareness of you  
and obedience too.'*

It is difficult to deny that a demure feeling of Kashmir, of his imagination and of his soul has been infused in these verbal melodies where the music of the syllables, the nostalgia of his land and the melancholy of a mourning people are blended into such a moving harmony.

'Seeking your cosmic wholeness' is a masterpiece, a mature and beautiful poem from the collection of 'a thousand petals' of love, which deserves to be discussed in some length. There are two strands of the theme of love; the one is mystic strand and the other the material or mundane and the two are woven in a subtle and dexterous manner here. The poet's material or earthly love (Ashaq-i- Majazi) is leading him to the love of reality (Ashq-i-Haqiqi) through his sharp insight that reveals the super soul lodged in his own self. The senses are for him "sacramental emblems of the spirit". In the poem, the theme is spiritual but the detail is material. How could such a celebrated poet from Kashmir remain outside the influence of Kashmiri mysticism?

*I get a bit here, a bit there  
yet it leads me nowhere near  
till I seek you in my inward eye  
and there you materialize  
in your cosmic wholeness.*

Master Zinda Kaul has expressed the same idea in his verse:

*"He was always by your side  
He has always been there  
The child listening to Surdas  
Singing of his love."*

### Poems of pain and agony

In the second section of the book are the poems of pain and agony. This is a common experience of the old and suffering people. The poet turns his magic mirror towards the people who are on the edge of the precipice and who long for death for the deliverance from their excruciating pain, suffering and mental turpitude. As the Urdu poet says: "The day of death is predetermined / then why pass sleepless nights."

So does our poet, Dr. Chowdhury in 'Reconciliation':

*"But I know not  
how to take into confidence  
my garden that misses my walk  
my books that I am too feeble to read  
my diary that I have not entered for long  
my house which I will quit  
to make place for whom?  
How do I reconcile them all  
to depart in peace?"*

For such a departure, nevertheless, detachment with the illusory world is all the more essential.

### Poems on Exile

In the third section, there is poem after poem depicting the nuances of life in exile- the trials and tribulations, the trauma, and identity crisis, as also the lighter and even humorous side of this life. 'The Keys' is a masterpiece and one cannot but enjoy the poem for its melody, spontaneity of expression and racy charm. By the brevity and compactness, it imparts effectiveness and sincerity and is a worthy illustration of the poet's power and grace as a verse writer.

Looking at the subject matter, though there is a fresh and original note in the poem yet it is reflective of the constant preoccupation of Dr. Chowdhury with the valley of Kashmir, his home, and the paradise lost. Though the destruction of the legacy and the treasures of generations in the ongoing saga of terrorism is intolerably sad, yet the poet's art is so exquisite, and so subtle, his sense of toying amusingly with thoughts "too deep for tears", that the poem fascinates rather than depresses. And the light romantic touch stimulates the imagination of the reader and makes it such a happy piece of work. There are two similes seemingly of contradictory purport. In the first part of the poem the rusted keys are

compared with an albatross, a bird of ill omen and curse, and possibly allude to "The Ancient Mariner" by Coleridge. The keys are merely acting as a source of frustration and encumbrance and Dr. Chowdhury might be well advised to follow the mariner's example and throw them into the Tawi. However, the second analogy compels him to retain them:

*"for I rub them softly, gently  
like Aladdin's lamp  
and all my treasures materialize".*

Yes, the poet must keep the keys to unlock the cellar of his mansion and perchance discover a bottle of old wine and the Rubaiyat and yearn like Omar Khyaam, "Let us make up in the tavern for the time we wasted in the mosque". Sweet memories! And, what a company during the wanderings in exile with no keys to the future.

'The Curse' is another poem of merit. The poet looks through the magic casement and visualizes the nemesis that has taken hold of the Happy Valley once deemed a paradise on earth. He paints the horror, scene after scene, in broad touches of his brush:

*"That mighty river of life,  
the Vitasta,  
now a foul gutter,  
her bosom laid bare,  
and unable to hide the secrets  
of broken bones and crooked skeletons  
of her once daughters and sons."*

It is just like an 'Ode to melancholy' and here 'the sedge is withered from the lake and no birds sing'.

Dr. Chowdhury is a modern poet with a mind and style of his own and, to boot, a humanitarian fire. The cumulative effect of his poems written with clarity and simplicity bring about a transformation through love and a catharsis of fear, pain and grief, leaving one tranquillised in the end. The grim tragedy of life is mitigated by the promise of hope. The magic of his style and the easy, varied and astonishing prosodic virtuosity make it another masterpiece.

## 2.0 REVIEW BY ARJAN DEV MAJBOOR

**Love blooms -Pain pulverizes- Exile kills**



A creative work of excellent poetry that encompasses the vast vicissitudes of life with its infinite shades of Love - physical, metaphysical and mystical – of the Pain and poignancy of terminal Cancer and the existential crisis of Exile - this is Dr. Chowdhury's Magnum opus, 'A Thousand-Petaled Garland'.

As in his profession as a physician, so also in his passion for poetry, Dr. Chowdhury soars high into vast and unexplored vistas. This time his work touches the subtle human feelings with his sweet metaphor, strong symbolism and frequent recourse to the great Indian philosophical tradition to which even poets like T.S. Eliot have bowed their heads. The book has been divided into three parts, namely, Adoration (love), Testament (the tragic saga of patients of cancer and their caregivers) and Exile (the banishment from homeland).

### Part 1: Adoration

That basic emotion of humans called love has been handled from a new perspective and defined in a new language and its scope expanded and amplified to give it cosmic dimensions. So much has been written on love yet it appears so little as another heart opens its secret treasure to the reader

This part has been dedicated to Leela, the graceful wife of the poet. Leela is a Sanskrit word with many meanings. A song of dedication which is written or sung for ones deity, a rapturous action of gods, the cosmic dance, the Bal *Leela* of lord Krishna as a child of delight sung by the legendary poet, Surdas. Dr. Chowdhury's love is not mere family love. It truly is Adoration as he calls it which transcends the physical and metaphysical to become divine. His is neither just Bharthihari's love of the outer beauty (*Shringara*) nor the love of the famous romantic English poets. Like Walmiki he captures the sight of acute love in this word picture:

*A pair of bulbuls on the glamohar / huddled close together, / cooing in each other's ear  
and a lover / a song on the lips and heart aflutter, / frisking to be near  
(Spring is here)*

Born in Kashmir, the poet is a lover of the beauties, which abound in the valley. Nature brings in his poems of adoration, a new concept to the baffled definition of love. See this remarkable stanza:

*Now when you are away/you materialize every where all times of the day,  
emerging like a mermaid /from the vast sea of memories  
breaking yourself into rainbow colours / from the tear drops of my reveries,  
flowing like a gurgling brook / alongside life's journeys.  
wafting fragrance into the garden / like the gentle spring breeze.  
(Taking you in)*

The lines "breaking yourself into rainbow colours from the tear drops of my reveries"- speak much more about the pious love in a different metaphor. Here the poet leaps up to the skies

from the *Patala* (nether world) of love. Leela to the poet is very sacred. A Sanskrit poet says:

*"Yatra Narias tu poojantey Ramantey Tantra devta  
Yatra tay Nastu pujantey tatra sarva Aphala Kriya"*

(Where ladies are worshipped /the Gods make their abode where they are disregarded / fruitless are all actions there).

In the same vein the poet speaks of his deity:

*Her name embodies her whole self, / her sights and sounds  
her traits, tastes, and tenderness / her velleity ,her vision  
I carry that sacred space with me wherever I be  
for their she reigns / my supreme deity.*  
(Sacred Space)

"Shakhtivada" has been a very powerful spiritual movement in Kashmir and in India. The goddesses rule even today and the men bow to them and sing hymns to receive their blessings. The concept of female power and female greatness is very old in India and the feminine names given to our country, rivers and other places is a testimony to this fact. The poet has once again pleaded for their reverence and their place of greatness in a period of chaos of ideas.

Sanskrit poets have written hymns and mantras for the daily morning recitation like the *panchastavi*- the devotional *shlokas* in praise of Durga. The goddess has been described as a cute damsel singing on a sitar. All parts of body- her hair, her face, her eyes, nose, teeth, breast and the gait are described in such amorous words as to strike wonder. So also in Geet-Govinda where the romance of Lord Krishna and his beloved Radha is no more than a bold and fascinating account of shringar *varnana* or the physical description of the female. But not Dr. Chowdhury to whom the female is sacred and divine beyond the physical. He takes great pains to weave a thousand-petalled garland for his beloved deity from the 'virgin' petals that have fallen from the almond blossoms in the *Badamvari* (the garden of almond blossoms) of his native city, Srinagar in Kashmir. He does not pluck them from the tree for that is forbidden and yet he must make the offering, a petal each for the one thousand names of mother Bhawani! What a fitting way to adoration, what a fitting title to this new creation of the poet!

Thus is also born the title poem where the poet captures these strong images from his boyhood in a simple and sweet language:

*My quest led me back in time / when, as little children / we would joyfully gather the fall from the almond blossoms/and weave them into wreaths / as offering to deities...  
Picking them virgin from the ground, petal by petal, / I threaded them together in an entire weaving of morning / a thousand -petalled garland embellished with your thousand names / each petal bearing my signature for you, my beloved of a thousand attributes*  
(A thousand-Petalled garland)

Even simple and routine emotions in daily life, like an unfinished phone call, can be crafted into masterly poetry and enjoyed for its sheer imagery:

*Yet the feeling remained / of an incompleteness, / a half taste,*

*a draft without a signature, / a task unfinished / of hunger insatiate  
when by some accident / the last morsel drops from the plate  
(A moment frozen in time)*

The acute yearning for the love can be seen in superb weaving of unique similes:

*I am dowry feather / floating without purpose in sultry weather  
a marble in river's bed / where water has ceased to flow  
a fish from the ocean deep / sighing helplessly in an aquarium,  
a wingless bird in airless place / neither able to sing nor fly.  
(When she is not here)*

While being fully conversant with the different literary periods of the Indian lore the poet is very much ahead of times taking a cosmic plunge into the nano-sciences to discover the ultimate truth:

*I gathered a bit here, a bit there /yet it leads me nowhere near,  
till seek you in my inward eye /and there you materialize /  
in your cosmic wholeness.*

and even the great Einstein's theory of relativity melts in the crucible of the poet's vision of love as he exclaims:

*Time and distance melt away / as she materializes / everywhere I seek her  
(Then she materializes everywhere)*

Having been forced to live in the tropical climes in exile how deftly he retrieves from the voice of his beloved the bountiful scenes of his birthplace, and Kashmir is reborn in his thoughts.

*Through that voice I see / the Dal's ripples in the morning breeze,  
and feel the "Vitasta" flowing past me / under the bridge across the Tawi,  
and hear the Lidder flowing down / singing her song of eternity.  
(Your voice)*

On and on the poet takes us to the vales and dales of human love unseen and untold. He describes the human mind in a bewitching literary piece of art.

*The human mind often mirrors / the essence of a person / in the very first encounter  
yet, having spent a life time together, / there springs a surprise now and then,  
a new shade, a new colour / like you suddenly discover / a nevus, a mole or a freckle  
in your armpit or your shoulder  
and in the end of this poem he brings forth the essence of real life, which is sometimes sweet, sometimes sour, to discover the 'flower behind the boulder':  
The essence of life together / between you and I, my love,  
is to ignore the sour and bitter / and to look for that flower  
which is always there, / hidden behind the boulder  
(Flower behind the boulder)*

One is lost in the vast heavenly realm of poetry and does not easily want to come of it as the poet pulls the cords of love to the whole expanding universe like our sofi poets, be they of Iran or Kashmir:

*Know it then that / like the expanding universe  
love grow from that point in you verily / it is only there that it will return  
(Love is no Monopoly)*

In the last poem of this section the vision of the poet touches the zenith of universality with its culmination point when speech gives way to the language of the eyes. It is said that when Lord Buddha came to deliver his last sermon to the learned Bikhshu's he sat at the dais, threw a glance at the audience, picked up a rose from the flower vase, produced it in front of them, and returned the rose to its place. Silence ruled for some time and the function was over. Dr. Chowdhury seeks truth in the eyes:

*Eyes, / language unto themselves / that no vocabulary can ever match,  
no Shakespeare, Kalidasa or Homer / put down in prose or verse,  
no artist draw or paint / no sculptor elaborate in bronze or stone ....  
when eyes meet eyes, / words, phrases, philosophy and all / dissolve in a wink.  
Look into eyes, / devolve deep into their depths /  
seek the quiet language of eyes*

### Part II: Testament

Testament is the saga of victims of terminal cancer and their caregivers, and relatives and friends. It is introduced to us thus:

*Pain like fire, consumes / like fire it purifies / and like fire it sublimates  
We all have to go through the fire test of pain / our own or of a near and dear one.*

The physician- poet knows and has felt acutely the pangs of pain of his patients, some of them his close kin. He compares the body of the dying patient with a drowning ship and the lightning bolts and thunders to which the ship is exposed:

*Yet my ship staggers, / and sinks little by little  
as it is struck again and again / now on the larboard / now on the starboard*

The pain is like a black hole that sucks in all life and its very meaning:

*I fight my pain / with pills, suppositories and syrups,  
capsules, patches and injections / but the pain, in its timelessness,  
returns with a vengeance / to bite me again and again....  
and the pain has the last laugh / as it proves the only anodyne  
to usher in that state / where pain becomes the cause and effect  
and the raison d'être / of living and dying.  
(Pain)*

The eleven poems in this section are not only an expose of the pain and pathos of people dying of cancer, their hopes and desires, their dreams and aspirations, their loves and lives, but also a philosophical treatise on the eternal subject of life and death, and of human relationships. The description is so starkly tragic as to be sacrosanct even for tears. The poet has sung everlasting poems on a theme ignored by many poets.

'Paying the Debt' is based on the existential crisis of a son in USA who has barely two weeks to spare to oversee the dying moments of his father and/or for performing the last rites, and of the father who would cherish his company when he needs it most, yet keeps

delaying his arrival so he does not suffer. This scene is touching and pathetic as the father ruminates:

*Yet, I have the comfort of the thought  
that he will make it  
and lend his shoulder to my mortal remains,  
or gather my ashes while they are yet warm,  
and take them in an earthen pot  
for their final immersion in the river,  
to flag me off to my final voyage.*

And touching the subtlest of human emotions when a close friend realizes that he was kept in the dark because the patient would not like to hurt him with the knowledge of his fell disease, the poet waxes eloquent:

*That you hold on to your pride  
to bear it alone with such equanimity  
may be your victory  
that you ever believe  
that what has steeled you  
would break me so easily  
as to compound your pain,  
alas, is my tragedy.  
(Sacrosanct)*

And this is how he pours his heart out with his feeling of gratitude to the patient for finally sharing his pain with him:

*To share a bit of your pain / to live some of your sufferings  
to feel a whift of your agony / to get signed while you smolder  
to wince while you groan, / to brave the shadow of 'Mahakala'  
while he waits on you / is the fire test for me / and my expiation  
(Gratitude)*

'Denouncement' is the final ascent of the soul as it traverses the seven *chakras* and leaves the body:

*The seven chakras froze/ the kundalini sapped / the shasradalkamal faded away  
and all consciousness snapped / as the clock stopped / and Mahakala took over.*

### Part III - Exile

Much has been written about the tragedy of Kashmiri Pandits, now in their 15<sup>th</sup> year of exile from the beautiful vale of Kashmir and Dr. Chowdhury has devoted the whole of his first volume of verse 'Of Gods, Men and Militants' to this subject. This section can be taken as a continuation from where he left in his first volume.

Fifteen marvelous poems in this part of the book dwell on the havoc wrought on the splendid and unique culture of ancient Kashmir, the very annihilation of its history, and the forced exile of the aborigines, and the legatees of that heritage, the Pandits, and their travails.

He laments the dismantling of ancient monuments of Kashmir by the looters thus:

*Martand, Awantipur, Parihaspur- / O, ancient monuments  
to the glory of the sun God, / Kashmir's legacy of a civilization acme-  
you withstood time's ravages, / the sword of the savages...*

*Stealing their own past / dismantling their own heritage  
they lay the foundation of their temporal residences  
of brick and concrete / with your stolen parts  
(Entombing History)*

The poems 'Keys' and 'Old man and the Tree' speak eloquently of the nostalgia for homeland and 'Summer in exile', 'The new Millenium' and 'Even Siva had a bath' of the struggle for daily existence in the harsh environs of exile:

*Summer in exile / a leveler of humanity / a fellow feeling of suffering and agony  
a wringing of the sins / like sweat that pours out from every pore of the body.  
Summer in exile – a sublimation, / a penance, / a transcendence.*

And poems like 'Dear departed ancestor' mourn the death of tradition, of religion, of the very basis of identity:

*Dear ancestor / how rapidly you are being pushed / into a distant pedigree.  
A generation has departed / in its prime in exile / and the new generation that  
grows, mingles and loses its identity / in cross matrimony*

In "Anonymity the poet attains the highest stage of consciousness which demand a lifetime of *teyaga* (renunciation) and devotion of the highest order even from great saints and yogis, to gain 'anonymity'. No name, fame or desire is left in such a person. This indeed is the *Parakasha* of the Indian spiritual thought. One must have experienced the mysterious void and then alone can one create such "Sutra-Poems", the poems akin to the Upanishadic thought. Poems like 'Creator' and 'Release' are in the same genre:

*We are born to seek release  
from the non-being before birth  
to the pain of being  
and we die to seek release  
to the uncertainties  
of the mysterious void beyond.*

And finally 'Golden Silence' supervenes, when words are only a burden and diction takes a new definition. It is like Shiva's swallowing the poison that came from the churning of the ocean to save humanity and Socrates drinking his cup of hemlock to immortalize philosophy.

Dr. K L Chowdhury defies his exiled state to create such exalted poetry and enrich the literary tradition of India.

### 3.0 REVIEW BY TEJNATH DHAR



K L Chowdhury is a distinguished neurologist of Kashmir, who is also an accomplished poet. When the lives of thousands of people of his community were threatened in Kashmir Valley in early nineties and they were compelled to go into exile, he articulated the grim horror and pain of their traumatic experience in forceful and moving poems in his first collection Of Gods, Men, and Militants (2000), which is already in its second printing.

Writing about tragic happenings of a colossal magnitude to which one has been a suffering witness is no easy task. This comes out poignantly in "Sieve," which also illustrates the directness, economy, and neatness of Chowdhury's poetic style.

*How do you suppose  
I can record  
the impressions  
of these violent times  
when every bullet  
that maims or kills  
punches a hole  
in my soul  
  
which by now  
is like a net  
cast in a river in flood  
with innocent blood?*

The poems in the collection are mainly about the fear, desperation, and helplessness of Kashmiri Pandits who, while fighting a losing battle with the militants in Kashmir, were compelled to appeal to one of their goddesses to reincarnate "Till we settle our scores/in this accurst valley of ours," and plead with another to "arise and strike ... / to signal war on the tyrant." Chowdhury turns brutal events and painful moments into compact poems, which demonstrate a highly controlled use of per formative language: its brisk pace in "The Battery of Jihad," dramatic power in "The Charge Sheet," and the chiaroscuro effect in "A Hundred Kilometer Tunnel of Fear." The poems related to exile are either grim renderings of his people's pain and agony or their hot anger against those who turned them into hapless sufferers. Several poems, such as "The Spirit does not Accept Exile," "Floral Adoration," and "Celestial Bridge" are about their cravings and longings, of people who have been forced to flee their hearths and homes and their gods and goddesses into an unfamiliar terrain, where they move about like dreamlike phantoms. Occasionally, where the mood is somberly reflective, as in "Paush Amavasya Night," Chowdhury produces lines of flawless fluidity.

The volume under review was first published in 2003 and reprinted in 2004. Though it has a number of poems on the theme of Exile, which figures in the first one too, it is dominated by poems of love and pain, which mark a shift in Chowdhury's poetic concerns.

The spirit of the love poems is crystallized in "A Thousand-petalled garland," in which the speaker-poet writes adoringly and endearingly about "my beloved of a thousand attributes." In "Sacred space" she is a dreamlike being, whose very name is a "mantra," which creates a sacred space that he carries within him: "I carry that sacred space with me/ wherever I be / for there she reigns, / my supreme deity." In "Metaphor of the soul" he is a devotee, ready "to open the breast Hanuman-like,/ that my heart I may lay bare,/ for you to discover/ your own self/ woven into each strand and fibre."

Almost all the love poems are celebratory in their spirit and dramatize the varied shades and delicate nuances of the togetherness of lovers. In "Then she materializes everywhere," the lover sees her like a divine being present everywhere, even when she is not with him, thus melting away the barriers of "time and distance." In "Seeking your cosmic wholeness," she appears in her "cosmic wholeness" in his "inward eye," and her voice in "Your voice" wafts like a primal sound "in its pristine purity, /unchanged by time and distance." The togetherness of the lovers in "The examined life" is compact, all-embracing, and rewarding, and no less than a marvel:

*Between the two of us, my love,  
there is so much to live by,  
to learn, to unravel, to share,  
so much, my love,  
between you and I.*

Their love admits only of continuous growth: "That the more I give of it / the more it grows between you and me,/ and the more I am able to share." At times, as in "Quintessential love," it is pleasingly puzzling: when "I am left to myself / she knows it is the surest way / of having me to herself entirely." In "Victory," even their fights bring "another victory/for both of us," and in spite of knowing each other fully well, they can still find, as in "Flower behind the boulder," some "little unknown bits / of each other," which provide them with "the secret and spice of life." The last lines in "No mean devotee" sum up their relationship quite neatly: "I grant, you are no ordinary deity, / but I too am no mean devotee."

The poems on pain deal with the poet-speaker's attempt to come to terms with the lived reality of pain. The lead poem in this section "Pain" dramatizes its furious power with deft hammer strokes: "With its invisible armory / it pierces and bores,/ crushes and grinds, / saws and hammers, / cuts and tears,/ burns and sears, / and delivers lightening bolts...." Eventually the speaker squares up to it by realizing that "pain becomes / the cause and the effect,/ and the raison d'etre, / of living and dying." Armed with this understanding, it is easy to understand the body turning into a Kurukhestra in "Battle ground" and people fighting a "righteous war," to win or fall a martyr, and to get reconciled to it in "Reconcilement" and thus be "At Peace" with oneself. This helps in seeing the difficulties of other people with unusual sympathy, as in "Paying the debt," in which the dying father knows instinctively that his son will discharge his debt by attending to his last rites, but discharges his own debt "by dodging his journey to this place / when I need him most."

People's fight with pain proves ennobling even for those who attend on them. One such person admits in "Gratitude":

*To share a bit of your pain,  
to live some of your suffering,  
to feel a whiff of your agony,  
to get singed while you smolder,  
to wince while you groan,*

.....  
*it is me,  
beholden for your indulgence,  
not you,  
whose suffering humbles and purifies  
and makes my life sublime.*

The poems in the section on Exile are few, and differ in their tone from the ones in the previous volume. Time, it seems, has mellowed the chemistry of pain. Fond echoes of the life that people have left behind and of their remembrance assume a different melancholic coloration. The rusted bunch of keys in "Keys" is like Alladin's lamp, a gentle rubbing of which "help me unlock / the memories of yesteryears," and death of an elder in the family reminds him of the tree in his home that grew with him to make for his pyre. The remains of the homes left behind are like ghostly houses where dogs "bark the whole night long / at the eerie shadows/ that flit across/ the open windows and doors." Unlike the Bamiyan Buddhas which disappeared in one stroke and attained nirvana, his religious and cultural sites are "desecrated and profaned perpetually." In poems like "Release," "Who is my Enemy?" and "Golden Silence" the speaker turns inward; mental and physical suffering caused by the exile yields to reflection on more profound aspects of life.

Chowdhury's poems are varied expressions of passionate feeling: intense, moving, profound, very human, and also easy to read. Even though the stuff of his poems is everyday experiences and actual events, he transforms them into effective poems by his skilful craftsmanship, largely realized by his deft handling of language, exemplifying an old dictum that poetry is best words in their best order. Probably because of this he rightly visualizes an ideal reader:

*whose heart beats in unison with mine  
as he travels from one page to another,  
who take it all in -  
each word, each line, each stanza -  
as I give it to him, my love's labor,  
I covet that single reader.*

## 4.0 REVIEW BY PROF. MASOOD-UL HASAN

Tastefully produced by the Writer's Workshop (Kolkata), this limited edition of fifty-five poems is Dr.K.L.Chowdhury's second offering to the Muse. His previous topical collection titled 'Of Gods, Men and Militants' (2000) was well received. The Garland shows a shift in the poet's mood, and a deeper mellowness of tone, confirming his equal facility with the lyre and the laser. But he particularly excels as a poet of pain and love. His principal poetic concerns are clearly reflected in his triple dedication of the book to Leela (his wife), his father and some other cancer patients in the family, and his fellow exiles from the Eden of Kashmir. Chowdhury's poetic motives are purely aesthetic and unworldly, for he writes neither to 'best seller' nor to add to the bulging, but neglected stocks of libraries. Like Ghalib, he sings for his soul mates, and covets 'that single reader / whose heart beats in unison with mine'.

Chowdhury distinguishes himself as a poet of nuptial love, the Cinderella of the English Muse. The constant epicenter of his love poetry is his wife whom he adores in every mood and situation of domestic life - ever wooing her anew. For their sheer frankness and sincerity evoke the memories of Coventry Patmore's classical celebration of wedded love in 'The Angel in the House' (1853). But while Patmore's serial poems derive their sustenance largely from their mystical undercurrents, Chowdhury's poems are entirely secular in character, though remarkably free from erotic overtones. Leela is a modern, enlightened avatar of Patmore's 'Angel'. She is a perennial source of sustenance and inspiration to her bard for, in her absence, he feels like 'a wingless bird in airless space / neither able to sing nor fly'. To him, Leela is a 'beloved of a thousand attributes' and epitome of compassion and kindness, a nurse to 'the beast, the bird and the flower', and a miracle worker to her ailing grand-child in the midst of her own excruciating ailment. 'A decade of Matrimony' tenderly, but realistically, charts the growth of their mutual love, and their arrival at the tenth milestone. Interestingly, the piece reminds one of a cognate poem by a modern Australian poet, James McAulay ('Celebration of Love'), paying rich tribute to his wife after several years of their marriage. In all fairness to him Chowdhury stands the comparison well.

Physical pain and unromanticized agony pervade the other two sections of the volume. With touching tenderness and empathy he voices the suffering and painful moods of some cancer patients known and dear to him. The patient fights his dreaded disease courageously with the help of medicines and palliatives, 'but the timeless pain / returns with a vengeance / to bite me again and again'. This losing battle for the sacred right to life is enacted in the Kurukshetra of the victim's body between 'my doctors, my family, my friends' and the 'asuras' of malignancy. Faith, however, sustains the patient's faith in his Karma, and prepares him to fight it out to martyrdom or to 'the ecstasy of victory'. In another poem the blanched, broken patient asks for 'a day off therapies', and begs for 'some time alone, / face to face with my fell disease', adding poignantly; 'I have not looked at a rainbow for long'. Chowdhury knows how to suffuse pathos with dignity. His oncological pieces and the elegy on his father (To Eternity) resemble some haunting disease poems of Sylvia Plath, and remind of his compatriot, Agha Shahid Ali, who wrote movingly of his cancer-struck mother's sufferings and funeral journey home from the U.S.A.

Intense psychological suffering, dismay and feelings of uprootedness subsume the poems in the section captioned 'Exile'. Some of these pieces read as threnodies on man and nature in modern day Kashmir. 'The Keys' is soaked in pathos, sounding the heart-rending fondness of a baffled emigrant for his lost home and surroundings. To the hapless oustee from the valley, the house keys, even though 'rusted with disuse' for ten long years, serve as the last

sentimental link with past - a symbol of belongingness - and he clasps them as a precious treasure.

*'I rub them softly, gently, like Aladdin's lamp,  
and all my treasures materialize.  
They help me unlock  
the memories of yesteryears.'*

The poet's love for his homeland informs all these poems, and 'The Curse' reflects his vision of indomitable Kashmiritat. The desolation in the valley is all-pervasive, covering nature, bird, flower and man alike. The 'muezzin's call is drowned in the din / of the grenade and the gun', while from the 'deserted Pandit homes' rise 'strange moans', and 'eerie shadows flit across / the open windows and doors'. Chowdhury, however, manages to retain his sanity and greets the new age with a fresh resolve and message of hope.

*'In that case I am okay  
and need not fear Y2K.  
I am immune to the bug,  
compliant and ready  
to face the new century'.  
(The New Millennium)*

His nostalgia and civilized impatience with patent injustice suggests comparison with his compatriot named above, and Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet - not altogether to Chowdhury's disadvantage.

In his later poems Chowdhury shows a widening of sympathies, even though retaining his primary interest in domestic love and his clan. His poetic technique too registers a modification. Early dream-imagery yields place to some striking 'Metaphysical' conceits (e.g., 'Love is no Monopoly') and use of classical metaphors, blended with Indian mythological allusions, contribute to his expressive, personal style. Occasionally, he resorts to mild satire (Anonymity) and introduces touches of sardonic humour (Old Professor Shambhu) inviting comparison with the famous Indian poet of English, Nissim Ezekiel. The later clipped and colloquial idiom shows touches of Andenesque influence.

Though, obviously, a late bloomer, Chowdhury shows mastery of idiom and poise often missing in practitioners of verse in India. Despite the occasional phenomena like Oliver Goldsmith, John Keats, O.W Holmes, William Carlos Williams or a Robert Bridges, the medical profession has never been a generous contributor to poetry. But K L Chowdhury is an exception. He is twice blest. He deserves a larger readership and wider notice as a poet of substantial merit.

**Prof. Masoodul Hasan**

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## 5.0 REVIEW BY PROF. TRILOKI NATH RAINA

Dr. Kundan Lal Chowdhury, the first doctor-poet who chose English as his medium made his debut in Indo-Anglican poetry with his 'Of Gods, Men and Militants', a highly acclaimed anthology. Incidentally, he is the second member of the medical profession in Kashmir to enter the field of letters, the first being Dr. Shanker Raina, who made a mark as a short story writer in Kashmiri. While Shanker's theme remained "the medical stories" throughout, Dr. Chowdhury's canvas was larger to include a diversity of experience. In fact his first publication, 'Of Gods, Men and Militants', is not about his patients, but about the traumatic experience he and his whole community passed through for no reason at all. This and the consequent Diaspora and the agony of exile form only the third section of his second publication, 'A thousand-Petalled Garland and other poems'.

The first thing that hits the eye as you open the book is the dedication. The first section, Adoration, is dedicated to Leela (his wife), the "source and inspiration". The second section, Testament, the most touching section, is dedicated to those of his closet relatives who were mowed down by the relentless scythe of death, the eternal harvester, while they were under his treatment - father, father-in-law, grandmother, uncle, aunt, cousin and all those others whom cancer devoured. The third section, Exile, is dedicated to victims like him, of a systematized pogrom which, like a whirlwind, flung them out of the lovely valley, their home for ages, to waste away in tents and tenements in alien lands, were the memory of where they belonged was more a state than a solace.

These poems, a faithful recording, like a meticulously maintained diary, of what was seen, heard or felt are different from a just superficial enumeration, because the whole ensemble is presented with a poet's sensitivity and emotional involvement. Talking of the emotional bond, he says:

*Unlike the gravitational pull / that dims with distance  
she draws me closer / the further she moves from me ...*

What makes for a lasting unity is

*An acceptance- groves, ridges and all- / an adjustment, but not a compromise,  
to fit the groves and ridges into each other, / like a hormone to its receptor.*

Describing the feeling of emptiness in separation, he says:

*I am a downy feather / floating without purpose in sultry weather,  
a marble in the river's bed / where water has ceased to flow,  
a wingless bird in airless space / neither able to sing or fly.*

And it is only a doctor who could describe the agony of a cancer patient thus:

*With its invisible armoury /it pierces and bores, / crushes and grinds,  
saws and hammers, / cuts and tears, / burns and sears,  
delivers lightning bolts / any place of its choosing,  
now forewarning, / now catching me unawares.*

And the last twist of the knife:

*And the pain has the last laugh, / as it itself proves*

*the only anodyne, / to usher in that twilight state .....*

He calls the body the battleground of Kurukshetra. The patient prays for his final deliverance, which eventually comes:

*The seven chakras froze, / the Kundalini sapped,  
the shasradalkamal faded away, / and all consciousness snapped  
as the clock stopped / and Mahakala took over.*

A patient's son comes from abroad, not in time to light the pyre but to carry and immerse the ashes, the mortal remains:

*What a unique reunion this, / we both eagerly looked forward to,  
on the cremation ground!  
Carefully he secured me in the urn, / like a treasure,  
and with what resignation he surrendered me / to the swirling bosom  
of the holy confluence / of the Ganga, the Jumuna and the invisible Saraswati*

In the first poem of the third section, he talks of the symbolic significance of the bunch of keys, the only belonging he could carry with him:

*Even after a decade in exile / I hang, from my girdle, this bunch of keys,  
keys that I carried with me when I was forced to flee- / keys to my home,  
keys to my relics, my diary, my library, / keys that opened the sanctum  
where my gods reside. / I keep wandering in exile  
carrying these keys / like an albatross*

He greeted Y2K thus

*Are there candles in the house /to light up the millennium night,  
is there enough kerosene in the stove /to cook the millennium meal,  
is a trailer somewhere handy /to tow water to my house  
that I buy weekly / for five hundred and fifty ?*

The valley is not the same after this accursed migration:

*The call of the muezzin / drowns in the din  
of the grenade and the gun,  
religion sells a penny, / curse sounds the sermon.  
They also say / that they hear strange moans  
from the deserted pandit homes...*

Some poems in this section (Exile) do not belong to this category, but are remarkable outpourings of a poet's imagination. They are 'The Old Man and the Tree', 'Old Professor Shambhu (a remarkable portrait), 'Creator' (in which he accuses God for creating the aberration called the human being), 'Release', 'Who is my Enemy?', 'Stranger', 'Even Shiva had a bath' and 'Golden Silence'.

This is just an attempt to present Dr. Kundanlal Chowdhury as essentially a poet and not just a narrator or recorder. A unique characteristic of his poetry is a rare combination of emotional involvement and clinical detachment. Though he is professionally extremely busy, the Muse calls on him, whenever he can spare a moment. His life fluctuates between the

stethoscope and the computer. I am sure by now another set of his poems would be awaiting publication.

Finally, it must be said that the theme of the second and the third section - helplessness while smitten by an inexorable foe, death or savage barbarism - has been handled with remarkable artistic restraint, which prevents the poignant portrait of intense agony from being buried in the raucous noise of brow beating and lamentation.

(The author of this review is a former professor of English, National Defense Academy Kharakvasla, Pune. He is author, translator, critic and reviewer and lives in Pune)

## 6.0 REVIEW EXCERPTS

The whole ensemble, presented with a poet's sensitivity, is a rare combination of emotional involvement and clinical detachment.

**Prof. Trilokinath Raina, Pune, (Kashmir Times)**

.... shows mastery of idiom and poise often missing in practitioners of verse in India. . He deserves a larger readership and wider notice as a poet of substantial merit.

**Prof. Masood-ul-Hasan, Aligarh**

The poems, honestly written, perhaps 'open the sanctum / where (your) gods reside'. The book will be read for the sincerity in the poems, their plain language and human values

**Jayanta Mahapatra, Cuttack, Orrisa**

Dr. K L Chowdhury's is a genuine, authentic voice, giving vent to the passions and agonies suffered by an entire generation of Kashmiri Pandits. His command over the language is mature and masterful, he is an emerging star in the firmament of Indo-Anglican poetry.

**M K Kaw (Naad, Delhi)**

The cumulative effect of the poems written with clarity and simplicity bring about a catharsis of fear, pain and grief, leaving one tranquillised in the end. The grim tragedy of life is mitigated by the promise of hope.

**Prof. Somnath Wakhlu, (Kashmir Times)**

... another milestone and a sure guarantee and proof of artistic maturity. Its reading each word, each line, and each stanza, as the author wants the coveted reader to do, will be an experience to be cherished. .

**Prof Ramnath Koul, (Indian Book Chronicle)**

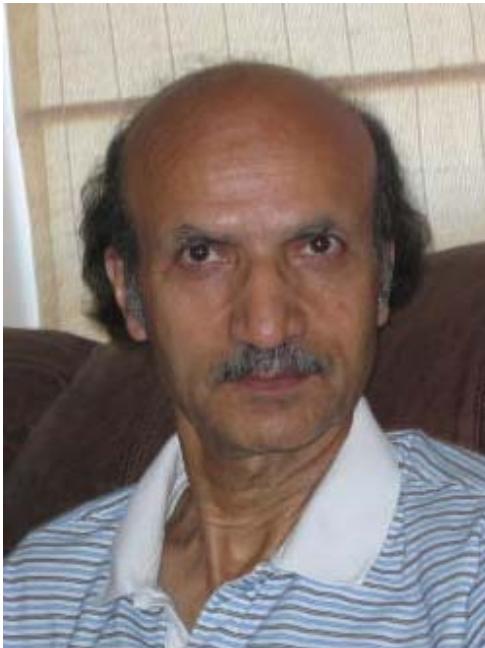
The present collection offers a unique and compelling sequel to the first work, in the sense of an awakened imagination and an arresting renaissance of feeling. .... a work of special charm and intoxicating aroma, specially meant for the discerning reader possessing an unwavering commitment to creative inquisitiveness and the ability to absorb images of an intense and rare nature.

**Prof. Kulbushan Razdan (Daily Excelsior)**

...a poet soaring to almost metaphysical heights as he deals out the deck of life's cards - the emotions, feelings, the nuances of fragrance and remembrance. There is an overflowing of love that alone can be the basis of a fulfilling life, there is a manifestation of pain which does not weep over the ache but laughs at the travails of life, and there is exile, distilled and refined, yet manifest in all its deprivations

**Dr. R L Bhat (Daily Excelsior)**

## 7.0 PROFILE



**Dr. K. L. Chowdhury**

Born in Srinagar, Kashmir, Dr.Kundan Lal Chowdhury is a Medical graduate (M.B., B.S).from Punjab University and postgraduate (MD) from Delhi University. He did fellowship in Neurology from London.

He started his career as a faculty member in Medical College, Srinagar, as a clinician, teacher and researcher, rose to become a Professor, and pioneered Neurology as a subspecialty in the Medical College.

In the wake of militancy in 1990 he moved to Jammu, and started a charitable hospital, the Shriya Bhat Mission Hospital and Research Center which provides free multi-specialty consultation and treatment to the poor and indigent patients and conducts medical camps, surveys and research. He conducted pioneering work on the Health Trauma of the Displaced Populations and coined new syndromes like "Stress Diabetes", "Psychological Syndromes of exiles", "The 10-12 Syndrome", "The metabolic syndrome in 'migrant' camp inmates" etc. and highlighted the adverse effects of stress and of environmental and lifestyle changes on a displaced population. He is the patron-director of Shriya Bhat Mission Hospital and Research Center.

Dr. Chowdhury is engaged in multifarious activities as a medical professional, social activist, journalist, poet and writer, essayist and reviewer.

**Publications:**

Dr. Chowdhury has published papers on various subjects - medical and scientific, socio-cultural, and political, making a mark in the literary field with the publication of his three highly acclaimed anthologies:

1- "Of Gods, Men and Militants" (Minerva Press India). 2000

2- "A Thousand-Petaled Garland and other poems" (Writer's Workshop, Kolkata) 2003

3- "Enchanting World of Infants" (Peacock Books, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, Private Ltd., New Delhi). 2007

**Awards:**

Dr. Chowdhury is a recipient of many awards, among others:

- 1) 'Kashmiri of the Year' 2007 by e-journal 'Shehjar', for his service to Healthcare and Literature.
- 2) The Rajive Ghandi Shiromani award in September 2007 by National Integration and Economic Council, for his outstanding service in various fields including health, community work, literature.
- 3) Pt. R N Koul Memorial Trust award, 'The Smiriti Samman' of 2006, for his missionary work in the field of Health and Disease for the poor and needy population.
- 4) Pt Prem Nath Bhat Amateur Journalist award 2004
- 5) The "Best Book Award for Excellence in Literature" in English, for the year 2008, by Jammu and Kashmir State Academy of Art, Culture and Languages was conferred for his work entitled "Enchanting World Infants"

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**Work in progress:**

Exodus Diary

My Medical Journey in Exile - stories

Dialogues between mother and son - poetry

Return to Homeland after 18 years –Travelogue

Roller coaster poetry