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Book Review

**‘Trailing the Transient Silhouettes of Meaning’ in
Sushmindar Jeet Kaur’s *A Journey Towards Light***

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Sushmindar Jeet Kaur’s *A Journey Towards Light* (2025) is a collection of around forty contemporary Indian English poems that situates itself within the continuum of spiritual, philosophical and lyrical traditions. Published in 2025 by Penprints, this first edition features poems like “Where The Soul Finds Its Home-The Golden Temple” and “I Am Not a Good Woman”, aiming towards a unification of devotion with introspection. At first glance, the collection belongs to a genre of modern reflective poetry infused with mystical yearnings, feminist assertion, and personal memory. Yet, upon deeper reading, it reveals a profound engagement with classical poetic traditions while also embodying the concerns of modern literary theory. Kaur’s poems range widely in subject—from meditations on time, nature and the Golden Temple to elegiac reflections on death, hunger and motherhood to finally settling to bold feminist assertions of identity and rebellion.

The collection demands to be situated within a comparative framework that bridges Eastern devotionalism with Western classical and modernist poetics. When read alongside the works of John Donne, John Milton, William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, and T. S. Eliot, the poems reveal both resonances and divergences. At the same time, the poems resonate with modern theoretical frameworks: Romanticism in their glorification of nature and spirituality, Modernism in their

fragmented consciousness, Postcolonial theory in their assertion of Indian identity and heritage, Feminist theory in their reworking of womanhood, and Reader-Response theory in their dialogic structure that invites participation.

The poems in the collection seem to follow a pattern, where each poem takes the reader on a journey, providing necessary signs and directions towards self-revelation. The motifs, oppositions, and narrative structures organize the poems into a unified whole. The sequence of poems is not a random collection of verses, but a well-thought-out pattern of events and within this pattern lies a quest into one's own existence. Using motifs from myths and narrative traditions, the poems transition from chaos to meaning. The themes of dislocation, uncertainty and paralysis serve as the breeding ground for anxiety, ambiguity and doubt. The early poems in the collection foreground a stage of stillness, lack and trance; envisioning the birth of a new thought, a new idea, a new self. The later poems move towards self-definition, reconciliation, and ideological clarity. Each poem gains significance through its position within this larger journey.

The significant part of the poems is its juxtaposition of binary entities to create a wide chasm of right/wrong, light/dark, presence/absence, self/society and many more. The words seem to come together as tools, instruments or sometimes daggers to cut open the deep-seated thought out of the poet's bosom. Acting as signifiers of truth, of emotion, of the poet's voice, the words serve as the propellers of thought, as if conspiring together to impart a new meaning to every verse, on every read. These oppositions are not static; rather, the poems work towards dissolving or transcending them, particularly through the merging of the self with the cosmos or the individual voice with the collective truth.

The collection is held together by recurring motifs such as the journey, light, water, silence and the body. These motifs function as stable signs whose meanings shift subtly across poems while remaining within the same symbolic system. Repetition creates internal cohesion and reinforces thematic unity. This first poem in the collection, "Where The Soul Finds Its Home-The Golden Temple" sets the tone of the entire collection- a need to belong, but also a need to exist within one's own identity caressed by the waves of repose and quietude. While describing the edifice of The Golden Temple, the poet writes: "Beneath the vast expanse of northern skies/Where the sun dips low, and the moon finds her reflection/ There stands a sanctuary of stillness, wrapped in the whispers of holiness and reverence..." (11). This interplay of light and darkness to create an ambience of calmness and stillness lends a surreal imagery to the poem. One can not only imagine

the grandeur of the religious edifice but can also feel the peace and calm that the poet longs for and seeks to bring forth, through the reflection of The Golden Temple.

The edifice of Kaur's collection is a single letter word 'I' which functions less as a loaded word, but more as a strong thread that binds the entire collection together. It dawns numerous hats- of a seeker, daughter, mother, rebel, devotee, wayfarer and many more. The poet writes: "Beneath the vast and boundless sky, where mountains embrace the firmaments and the earth hums a rhyme as old as time, a wayfarer walks, feet heavy with the dust of forgotten lanes" (49). This multi-faceted 'I' serves as a critique of the society that allows a person to assume so many identities, but never the one that is really hers. Thus, it highlights how identity is constructed within cultural and linguistic systems rather than being purely individual. She writes: "Within the tapestry of actuality's weave/ I discern patterns yet uncharted and unexplored/ Unmapped, unknown and perhaps uncultivated silhouettes Seeking truths hidden or veiled, beyond yonder..." (36). While weaving her own identity, she also urges the readers to join in her journey of self-revelation: "Come, let's explore the mysteries of existence/ The drive of being, the ride to subsistence/ Seeking not just responses, but perception and harmony/ In the eternal chase of the promised land..." (37). This identity crisis that the poet feels is part of her quest to understand the inner recesses of her mind and at the same time a call to the outer world to call upon her: "to travel and be transported to the home/ But through the sea waves, By being absorbed in these/ And becoming cool and calm/ Tranquil and unruffled..." (14).

The poems draw upon religious, philosophical, and literary codes drawn from Sikh thought, Indian philosophy, and Western literary traditions. These codes situate personal experience within shared symbolic systems, enabling readers to decode meaning through collective cultural knowledge. The poem "Confluence": "A merging with the boundless light that embraces the cosmos" (19) invokes Milton's divine illumination and the Guru Granth Sahib's doctrine of *Naam*. Light operates as an archetype of knowledge and unity. "The long-awaited Shabad, the Anhad Naad" (47) reflects Sikh mysticism. Similarly, Sufism, with its themes of longing (*ishq*), annihilation of the ego (*fana*), and the metaphor of travel (*safar*), provides a rich cultural and spiritual framework for interpreting Kaur's poems (Ernst 1997; Schimmel 2011).

One of the dominant themes in the poems is a yearning desire of transcendence, of merger with the higher self, where a union of the soul and the divine light is ensured. She writes: "A truth that did not need to be spoken./ She closed her eyes, letting the amber light wash over her/ And at that

moment, she became part of it all— Auburn, ambrosia, earth” (59). This soul’s longing for the divine light is reflected through the metaphors of rivers, winds and stars: “To live is to dissolve into the boundless, / To love is to abandon the boundaries” (Unification 19). Akin to the metaphysical poets of Western thought and the spiritual thought of Sikh traditions, Kaur does not ground her poetry in abstract metaphysical conceits but in concrete spaces of worship. Death and transience recur throughout the collection. “In After I Am Gone”, the speaker imagines her ashes scattered across unknown fields and rivers: “Will they remember the warmth I offered? / Or will they step over the dust / With the same indifference” (15). This anticipates the elegiac tradition of English poetry. Milton’s *Lycidas* similarly transforms personal grief into universal meditation on loss, while Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* dwells on mortality’s burden.

The journey that these poems entail is one of inwardness: “It is not a journey outward, but a peep within, a rumination, a surrender” (19). Reminiscent of Dante’s *Inferno* or of the traditional Katha *Upanishad*, the poems also reassert the fact that the truth is realized inwardly and the journey is symbolic of the universal signifier of transformation. “The unfathomable gulf and a chasm of the loss of bliss,/ I traverse the depths of my own inner strife,/ Navigating the shadows, the doubts muddled,/ In search of the truth that transports me to a designated being...” (38). Her disgruntlement with the outer world is reflected through her desire to turn to ashes, as all hopes of them finding meaning in her life will be futile. She feels that with her death she will “carry the weight of their anger/ Without letting it anchor me still” (15). Even though she knows that the world will never be able to understand her, she lends an optimistic note: “And when they brush my ashes away, / May they pause, And wonder about the person I was, / The life I lived for them, Even when their gaze was elsewhere./ Let that wondering be enough” (16). For the poet, even if for a second her identity is acknowledged, she feels her life has been well-lived.

In her hope to be recognized, she finds her voice in the marginalized. Their fearless act of resistance in the face of adversity and existence in the midst of hopelessness: “I love disfavoured and feeble, / for their tears - tears that are silent but fierce, / tears that are inaudible, reserved, and wordless” (18) gives her strength to fight her own battle with fortitude and courage. In “My Love,” Kaur turns her attention to marginalized figures—poverty-stricken, disfavoured, and hungry. Her celebration of their dignity, endurance, and generosity resonates with Walt Whitman’s democratic poetics in *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman embraced the “common people” with expansive catalogues; Kaur adopts a similar tone: “Yet the affection they give with hands that have nothing / nothing but

the strength to hold on, to endure” (18). She moves forward to unravel every layer of her being, to expose the naked, vulnerable and nascent truth: “Detaching away layers of self/Until all that remains is the soul’s unadulterated Truth.” (19) Brazenly charging through the flames of resistance, “Her roots nudge deep into the earth her twigs stretch toward the sun. (20)” for this not a fight but” “It is a homecoming— to herself, to the women who were, and the women who will be” (21). “I Am Not a Good Woman” aligns with Antigone and Mirabai in resisting normative morality. The female voice emerges as a classical moral agent challenging hegemonic structures. The lines: “What’s the need to be good, then?/ I am not good. / neither do I regret nor feel sorry nor do I repent or apologise and ask forgiveness./ I will remain so./ yes, I am not a good woman...” (52) reminds one of the poems ‘Phenomenal Women’ by Maya Angelou. Preserving the nonchalant relationship with the outer world, the poet celebrates her badness, thus challenging the cultural constructs of good, as defined by society.

This poet on the journey acts as the wayfarer who charts the path and chooses to walk on it too. “The wayfarer becomes the path itself” (49) dissolves the binary between subject and object. Foreword by Sukrita Paul Kumar praises its meditative quality, noting the poet as a “wayfarer” who becomes “the path” (6). Eliot’s *Four Quartets* and Kabir’s *Bijak* similarly propose cyclical temporality. This reflects a classical worldview where enlightenment is recursive rather than linear. Her poems affirm classical humility before time. She writes: “Time is not merely a backdrop but the very substance of life itself, a fundamental dimension/ That shapes reality and defines the parameters within which we live which ultimately leads us forward,/ Towards the unknown, towards the infinite horizon”(61). Kaur’s meditations on time in poems like “The Temporal Fabric” and “The Unfolding Continuum” situate her within modernist concerns. Time is seen as a relentless continuum, shaping identity and existence: “Time is not merely a backdrop / but the very substance of life itself” (60).

Using nature as Semiotic and Spiritual Code, the poet relies heavily on them to convey the metaphysical truth. Like Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey* and Tagore’s *Gitanjali*, Kaur’s nature symbolism in the form of rivers, wind, and silence encode transcendence. She doesn’t just allude to nature as an aesthetic entity or a motif to propel her thoughts further; she also notes her discernment at the present plight of mother nature, in the midst of growing urbanization and development. She notes: “How much longer can she bear the weight of our indifference?/ There is a cost to this blindness, a price for our endless hunger” (72).

Kaur's language evokes vivid imagery, as in "The Seashore Beckons," where waves symbolize elusive peace: "Tempting, summoning, and refreshing me,/ Loudly calling me by my name" (13). Her writing style is characterized by free verse, extended imagery, and a reflective cadence. Unlike classical English poetry, which relied on structured meters such as iambic pentameter, her poems adopt a rhythm of meditation. This aligns her with modern free-verse traditions inaugurated by Whitman and later continued by modernist poets like Ezra Pound. Yet her free verse often employs repetition and anaphora, echoing the musicality of Sikh shabads (hymns). The oral and devotional quality recalls the Psalms of the Bible as well as the bhakti tradition in Indian vernacular poetry. For example, in the poem "Symphony" (47), she invokes music as both spiritual and ecstatic force, reminiscent of Rumi's Sufi mysticism and William Blake's visionary songs.

The collection moves towards closure through integration and resolution. The seeker becomes the path, resistance becomes self-definition, and fragmentation gives way to unity. The title itself functions as a guiding structural metaphor, fulfilled by the end of the volume. It operates as a patterned and unified poetic system. Its significance lies not merely in emotional or spiritual expression but in the architecture of meaning created through repetition, opposition, and narrative progression. The poems collectively articulate a universal grammar of human seeking shaped by language, culture, and symbolic structures.

Thus, Sushmindar Jeet Kaur's *A Journey Towards Light* stands as a testament to contemporary Indian English poetry's ability to converse with classical traditions while asserting distinct cultural and feminist identities. Through spiritual quest, meditations on mortality, compassionate humanism, and temporal reflections, the collection situates itself within universal poetic concerns. Its free verse style, symbolic motifs, and devotional undertones connect it with both Romantic and modernist lineages. Ultimately, *A Journey Towards Light* illuminates the possibility of literature as a space where tradition and modernity, East and West, self and community, converge. It reminds us that poetry remains, in its deepest essence, a journey towards light, truth and renewal.

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