

Crows Are Symbols of Survival in Nikita Parik's Powerful Collection of Poetry

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In a 2011 [interview](#), Kolkata-based artist Shuvaprasanna makes an inalienable connection between his hometown and the ubiquitous black-feathered bird: “*Kaalo* [black], Kolkata, *kaak* [crow] – I am drawn to them all. Other birds are dying in metros but crows are survivors.”

His rhetoric is supported by scientific research – a 2015 [paper](#) by zoologist Biplab Kumar Modak shows that the house crow, *Corvus splendens*, was found “abundantly, irrespective of human habitation type in greater Kolkata”. It is, thus, no surprise that Kolkata-based poet Nikita Parik chooses the bird as a symbol for her city in her second collection of poetry, *My City is a Murder of Crows*.

In an early poem in the book, *Survival*, Parik writes:

Post-jab, my city

is a murder of crows:

loud caws,

sharp claws,

and beaks

that may break bread,

or carry the dead.

The jagged imagery and staccato end-rhyme are almost Hitchcockian, perhaps a subconscious reference to the 1963 film *The Birds*.

Adapted from the eponymous short story by Daphne du Maurier, the film depicts birds attacking hapless residents of Bodega Bay for no apparent reason. It was partly inspired by a similar incident at the town of Capitola in California on 18 August 1961, where seagulls infected with toxic algae attacked humans. While the film has been, rightly, considered a classic of the horror genre, it has run into controversy in recent years after actress Tippi Hedren alleged that director Alfred Hitchcock sexually assaulted her during the filming, and on being rebuffed allowed her to be injured when the famous phone booth scene was shot.

For Parik, the pandemic, with all its death and devastation, is a horrifying but ultimately meaningless experience. Philosophy scholar Emily Hughes in a paper published earlier this year, used Martin Heidegger's work on boredom to interpret the "meaningless and monotony of pandemic". It emerges as a painfully drawn-out pause that puts life in abeyance, as Parik writes in another poem, 'Apocalypse':

Post-jab, this city

has been a stinking *Hilsa*

in a co-passenger's tote bag:

it holds promises,

but all in future tense.

The imagery is remarkable. A delicious fish is a common pleasure for many residents of Kolkata, but to be able to enjoy it, one needs to survive the pandemic. And, to survive the pandemic, one needs to take the jab of the vaccine. Even simple pleasures of life, such as eating fish, are held in abeyance, "all in future tense". Though its olfactory stimulation attacks our senses beyond the ubiquitous masks. The pandemic, with all its components such as quarantine, masks, vaccines, and imprisons one in limbo.

But more remarkable than the imagery is the subtle change in the verb from the first poem to the next one. The second line of the first poem starts with "is", in the present tense; but in the second poem, the tense has changed to "has been", the present perfect continuous tense. This subtle grammatical manoeuvre accentuates the sense of being stuck in the doldrums far more than the imagery. It works on the subconscious of the reader, implanting an emotion and feeling in them.

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Parik, who has a Master's in English and another in Linguistics, is a keen and subtle manipulator of language and poetic techniques. It is evident in the wide variety of poetic forms she uses for the 61 poems in this book.

While there are regular free verse and prose poems, there are also ghazals, haibuns, and even an AnthAdi, which Timothy Green, the editor of the American journal *Rattle*, describes as “a style long used in Tamizh literature, in which the variation of the ending word of the first stanza becomes the first word of the next stanza”. In Parik’s poem, ‘Circles’, it works something like this:

On a page
a word
stirs.
Stirring stalks
flowers
buds of May.
May showers
tease
our forlorn skies,

It is no surprise that this book has been long- and shortlisted for several prizes, including the Rama Mehta Writing Grant 2021, Toto Awards for Creative Writing in English 2022, and The Emma Press UK’s manuscript submission programme. Parik is also the 2023 Charles Wallace Fellow in Creative Writing at the University of Stirling in Scotland.

Beyond the undeniable poetic merits of this book, it also has a deeper core in a too-close-for-comfort experience of the pandemic. A cycle of seven haibuns is marked with the subtext “CMRI Hospital, August 2020” or “Post-hospitalisation, August 2020”, referring possibly to pandemic-related hospitalisation of Parik or someone close to her. These poems are not arranged chronologically or altogether to indicate a cycle, but they are linked through thematic unity.

The three poems – ‘Improv’, ‘Static’, and ‘Amp’ – written possibly from the hospital bed are saturated with images of coldness.

“This cold isn’t environmental, this cold is inside me,” writes Parik in ‘Improv’. There is the coldness of a needle and a thermometer, the shivering darkness of the hospital room, and the fever. It all leads to the question: “*Did we love enough, live enough, do enough?*”

In the first wave of the pandemic, as the death rate soared and the vaccine was yet to be made readily available, being hospitalised after an infection could have seemed a near-death experience and recovery a miracle.

In these poems, the influence of Sylvia Plath is undeniable, especially her poem 'Tulips', which she possibly wrote while recovering from a surgery. The in-between state as she recovers from anaesthesia and the desire to sink back into unconsciousness is channelled by Parik through similar imagery of the hospital room and reinforced through a quote from a letter Plath wrote to her friend Eddie Cohen. Even as the narrator of Parik's poems recovers, she finds herself quite disoriented, "the envy of all of the dead." She is very nearly a ghost herself in the poem 'Tremolo':

I walk from room to room all night in the effort to tire myself into sleeping. The house opens its many eyelids and watches me glide in the darkness. I am the ghost it sometimes imagines.

But despite this unreal feeling of survival, the nightmares, the post-traumatic recuperation, and grief, the desire to live is undeniable. "The systole and the diastole" ensure that the narrator is still alive. It is an image of hope.

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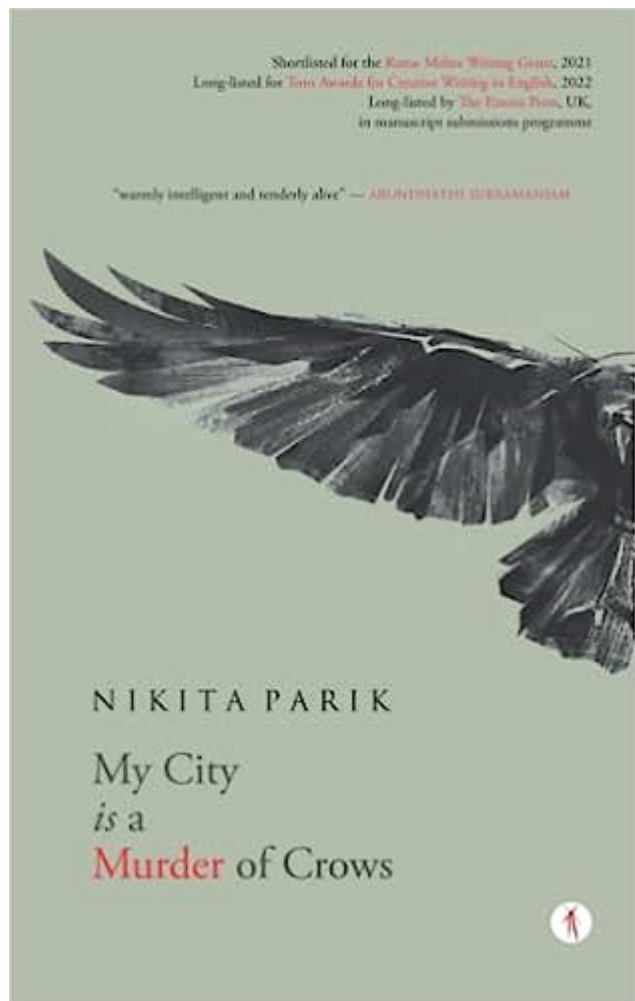
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