

Nothing Endures But Change: Haris Adhikari's *Flowing with a River*

Gordon Hilgers¹

Is life truly a river? It depends upon how one looks at life. When a human being peers into what life is, or what such a human being believes life is, the biggest problem he may or may not consider is that this puzzling universe never seems to stay still. It is perpetually in flux. Ages ago, in the Western pre-Socratic tradition, a man named Heraclitus noted this, and from this observation decided that man never really can know who he is because the universe provides no answers.

“No man ever steps into the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man,” is what Heraclitus is said to have said. There is a problem with this. We can know little of what he really said, mainly because much of what we know about him, or think we know about him, is revealed in numerous stories about him as told by numerous philosophers who, as usual, had their own agendas in citing him as an authority.

This revelation hides another problem, and it is an important one: If we cannot really know ourselves in a mysterious flow of universal chaos, how can we know anything? If there is no solid ground, our identities are also really little more than that foot stepping into the river time and again and thus constantly changing. This is where another Heraclitean concept absurdly steps-in. Heraclitus cited Logos, a divine reason or order, a logic just beyond what we think we know. This is where our predicament gets muddy.

What if someone or a group of people tell us what this logos is? Do we trust them? Or do we decide for ourselves? It is safe to say that, no matter what we are told or taught, these interpretations amount to rumors or opinions.

Oddly, civilization with all its norms—its normality—begins here. What is solid to us we call empirical knowledge: we know what is what through observation or experimentation. This way that river seems to make sense to us. It is easy to become overly socialized; easy to rely on norms for one's security; easy to suddenly believe the norms of an artificial construct called civilization are more real than the wild-eyed realities civilizations are designed to address. This is where Nepali poet Haris Adhikari begins his collection, *Flowing with a River*.

To put it succinctly, Adhikari possesses an admirable ability to simplify into seemingly quotidian words the mysteries of this odd collision of two universes, and he does so with both reverence and a twinned sense of amused wondrousness and detached irony.

“My Life Is a Thread of Ironies”, Adhikari titles one poem of paradoxes, and writes, “... I made the space a little bigger. / Now it's the biggest for me— / and this very space / is eating me up!” Everywhere is a river here, a river of choices, a river of various tools and strategies, a river of urban life in Kathmandu. But Adhikari points out how well he sees his mechanizations fail to fill him even halfway to the brim of what he knows he is in truth. His perspective here is of a battle between him

¹ The author is a poet based in Dallas, Texas.

and civilizational norms. He complains this normality is hurtful and sometimes bitter. Yet he also sees its half-measures for what they are worth.

Here in America, where I live, a famous British psychologist, R. D. Laing, once observed that insanity is a sane response to an insane world: “The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one’s mind, is the condition of the normal man,” he wrote. How to deal with that? Change one’s circumstances? Remain intoxicated? Awaken to the authentic? Perhaps. But how to find the authentic?

This sense of being divided within oneself, Adhikari expresses profoundly. He’s waiting for a woman to arrive, he washes a bottle in a stream until he can more clearly read the writing on it, he seeks a rapprochement with his own sickness: “Poem,” he writes, “is like the shaft of sunlight / penetrating / the deep, silent corners / of woods. . . Poem / is everywhere / looking for a poet!”

In brief, Adhikari demonstrates that, in seeking to meet this elusive poem, the poet is either confined or freed by the simple fact he (or she) does not fit. Poetry, in this manner of thinking about it, is erosion—though often it is eroded by the reflexive sensibility that one must fit, one must adhere to this or that, one must abide by the generalized fixation on what also alienates, oftentimes more than it sates.

Be ever-positive, the stupefaction mechanically commands. It is the adharma dharma, and it is very confused. Insatiably hungry, it consumes all. But it names all who disobey zombie. Like the pot calling the kettle black. Ah, such a life of abusage. Adhikari paints this stark portrait in his poem “Suffocation”.

Let me pollute you, it cries. “I woke up to find myself / entangled / in a number of hooks. / Like an animal tied / to a wooden post in a dead pasture, / I go round and round / to break free”. Here, in the poem “To Make the Ropes Undone”, Adhikari describes what Homer may have labeled Cyclops, what Orwell dubbed Big Brother, a subject of many names throughout the millennia, a Circe, the Medusa, always monstrous, something or someone to defy.

Regardless, Haris Adhikari disseminates peace, clarity, love and kindness as he approaches that mysterious Logos. “Flowing with a River” amount to his letters from a Nepal of the human heart. This is what flows everywhere one may choose to go. Swimming here is the easiest of all difficult things.