

Rabindra K. Swain. **Susurrus in the Skull**. New Delhi. Authorspress. 2008. 68 pages. Rs100. ISBN 978-81-7273-399-5

This fourth book of poetry by Rabindra Swain (b. 1960), born in Orissa and a resident of Bhubaneswar, possesses a panoply of deep and moving visions, not only of Swain's incisive questioning of his own self but also of the tapestry of Orissan life to which he belongs. The title poem, "Susurrus in the Skull," achieves the feat of bridging both Western literary tradition and the customs of India. The poem is triggered when the poet looks at a drawing of a skull. He alludes to a method of death of Greek rebels and to the novel he is reading, *Sputnik Sweetheart* by Murakami. In doing so he stakes a claim both in fierce historic struggles and the literary creation of his continent.

There is another layer of meaning, as the poet realizes he is inside his own skull, a living skull. Hamlet is evoked subtly, when he describes the possibility of the skull rolling in the village cemetery. More Shakespearean notes ring when the poet's daughter is transformed into Cordelia: "Or if my fate is worse, / it will be still there / for the Cordelia of my

daughter / to pick up blindfolded / and declare to the world, / it is her father's." This is the first of three important women in the poet's life. Second, his wife, widowed, would ask on a visit to the cemetery if sex had been in his skull and not in the genitals, as he had claimed. The last and very poignant is his mother, who would weigh her son's skull and say to herself that he had always been like a bird, afloat in the wind.

Orissa's rich historic landscape appears in many poems. The yellow flower *kaniar* is offered to Lord Jagannatha. Temple banners flutter. A flamingo acquires a yogalike posture on Lake Chilika. A rainbow is arched over the Lingaraj temple. The poet hears the rumble of thunder across the Khandagiri hills.

Rabindra Swain has produced literary criticism (*The Poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra: A Critical Study*) and has translated poems and stories from Oriya. He is also the managing editor of *Chandrabhaga*.

Alicia Miranda-Hevia
San José, Costa Rica

World Literature Today
May - June 2008