

Danielle Hanson, Editor, *Sightlines: View Points on Susheel Kumar Sharma's The Door is Half Open*, New Delhi: Paragon International Publishers, 2024, pp. XVIII + 359, Rs. 595/, \$ 25/-, € 25/-, ISBN: 9789394964259.

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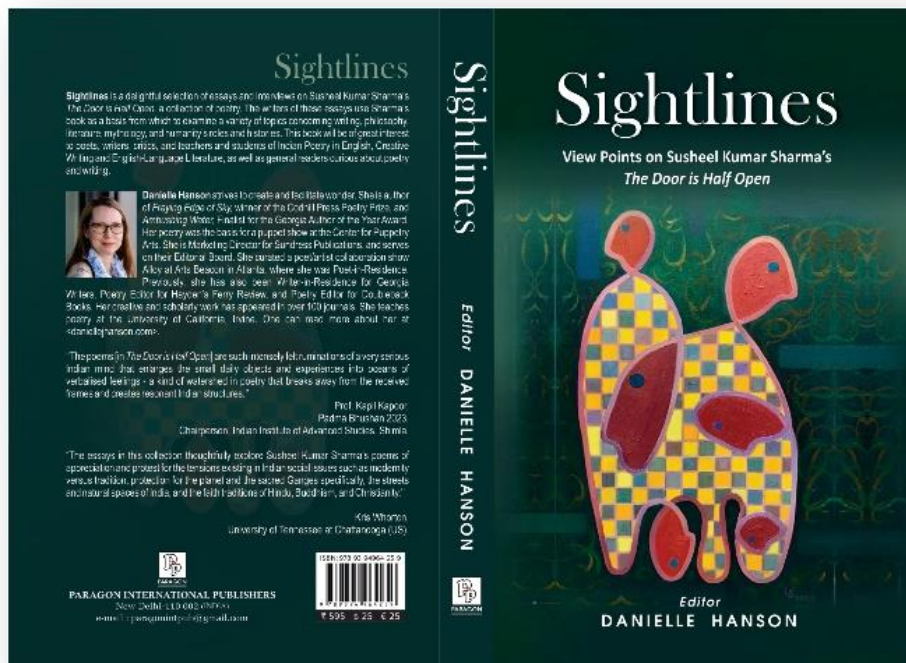
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Critique on the interviews of Dr S K Sharma in “Sightlines: View Points on Susheel Kumar Sharma’s *The Door is Half Open*”.

The cover page of the book is a piece of art. The painting on the book cover, “Connections” 2022, Oil on canvas 61 x 48 cm, is by Luana Stebule, a Lithuanian painter, based in London. Interestingly the book is dedicated not to any family member or individual but to poetry and friendship across the world. “The Prelude” penned by Danielle Hanson initiates the reader into the thought-provoking collection. In the introduction, Danielle Hanson, the Editor, gives the justification for bringing out the collection, why such academic activities should be considered as central academic activity. I do agree with Danielle Hanson who concludes his editorial comment with, “These articles and interviews are by nature partial, and focused on specific aspects of Sharma’s work.” The book is divided into two parts. The

first part accommodates review articles while the second part contains interviews with Dr. Sharma by contemporary critics. This review is not attempted on the entire book but on section B that contains the interviews of the poet by well-known critics. I found all the interviews are incomplete and could have been more exhaustive, though they kaleidoscope many possible aspects of Sharma's mind and method. Susheel K. Sharma is a prominent name among the post independent poets of India and the book gives us a chance to peep into the poet's mind and the way he thinks and creates. The section that offers interviews of the poet is the most vocal of all that this book contains. As a reviewer I am expected to have a fairly good understanding of the text and the content of the reviews written on the text. Though I claim to have access to the text under discussion, *The Door is Half Open*, I could never pen down a review for the circumstances beyond my control. To understand the man and his mind one should read the interviews. It is through interviews that one can familiarise oneself with creative process and the craft that a creative mind employs to create his art. Creativity is a spontaneous activity and the creative process is the template that fixes the bounds of the art created. Once you are intimate with limits of the creative mind, you can delineate the text better. And if you know the person, it may further help you to decode the text, though, at times, proximity disallows the disinterestedness, which is must for a critical mind. For some, the author-centric approach limits the scope of criticism and may be avoided.

"Chandra Mouli in Conversation with Susheel Kumar Sharma" is the first interview in which Chandra Mouli tries to unearth certain untouched aspects of Susheel Sharma's creative methods and his philosophical mind through his questions. Sharma is well rooted in Indian philosophical thoughts, collective Hindu Consciousness, and his poems evidence it prominently. Collective Hindu consciousness can be compared with uninterrupted flow of a river and Sharma (un)consciously chooses the Ganges for his creative expression. Ganga Mata never discriminates among her children, bestows her compassion on all living and non-living and her existence as tradition, as a life-giving force, depends on those whom she gives life. She can't be separated from her children. Ganga Mata is a civilisational motif and symbolises cultural coexistence. The poet in his poem "Ganga Mata- A Prayer" is inalienably linked with her like a foetus is linked with mother. In his conversation with Chandra Mouli Sharma asserts, "*Therefore, I feel that I am not a unit in isolation but a part of the whole, just like a cog in a machine. I feel concerned towards all that feels, persists, and exists within my*

perception and beyond. I try to see various relationships that are apparent and are not so apparent in order to understand them and not necessarily to redefine.” (p. 279)

A poet exists from the beginning of the time and for him past and present are inseparable. At least at the level of consciousness he represents entire humanity, where Time can't be balkanised. Ideologies of past and present cannot dent true creative consciousness. This and only this is the hallmark of creative grandeur. Sharma says emphatically, unequivocally, *“I feel good literature cannot be produced in absence of a social consciousness but can be produced even in absence of ideological stand.” (p. 280)*

The second interview in the book, “Abidi Interviews Susheel Sharma”, consists of two interviews by Syed Ahmad Raza Abidi. Susheel Sharma, the poet, believes that things and people cannot bear meaning in isolation. For him the individual existence gets meaning from collective existence, nevertheless individual is important because individuality engenders vividness and beauty. He simplifies the Hindu belief that there is one God that pervades the entire universe but every individual is different due to his innate nature. All individuals are the reflection of the ONE but they are different at the same time. He gives the example of Ayurveda where no two individuals are the same. He says,

“In Ayurveda it is believed that no two bodies are the same. I too believe that no two human beings are the same. I feel that each object on this earth (viz. human beings, animals, birds, plants, trees, and minerals), other planets and the stars around us are interconnected with invisible threads which are like telephonic wires carrying messages from one place to another.” (p. 290)

He believes in Karma theory where a person's deeds have consequences that determine the course of action in one's life including death. It is the central motif of Hinduism and other philosophical thoughts revolve around it.

Sharma observes keenly, focuses on commonplace things and incidents that might not interest an ordinary person. As a poet he observes the unobserved, gives voice to voiceless and provides choice to them who do not have choices. Sharma tells the interviewer, *“A feeling to communicate with those who feel like communicating with me [is the motive of my poetry]; I try to bring their attention to certain observations that I feel are important but have largely gone unnoticed.” (p. 293)*

However, he presents the common things in an interesting way, in uncommon manner. All good poets do the same but their methods are different due to sociocultural variations. The most common becomes uncommon in Sharma's poetry because he sublimates the perennial human emotions and relations. He says, "*One should therefore take a route that leads to the higher values, that leads to sublimation and talk about those emotions/passions that cut across time and space.*" (p. 300)

In his interview with S C Dubey, Sharma reveals his views on the concept of evil and righteousness. Here he seems to be influenced by the evil Abrahamic concept of good and evil. Hinduism does not corroborate this concept. Hinduism believes in the concept of Karma based on the principle of cause and effect. On being asked, "Have you ever been obsessed with the ideas of righteousness and correctness?" Sharma gives a very simplistic answer that does not go well with his concept of Ganga Mata's worship who purges the devotees of all the sins caused by undesirable Karma. The philosophical ambiguity of this sort impedes the overall critical estimation of the poet. Sharma says,

"I do not subscribe to the view that "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." On the contrary, I believe that things are good and things are bad and by thinking properly and perceiving the phenomena properly one may realise what is good and what is bad. Yes, I believe in the ideas of morality and ethical practices but I suffer from neither obsessions nor compulsions. Some people suffer from both." (p. 316)

All religions, including Hinduism, have an understandable concept of sin, suffering and salvation. Christian theology talks about perpetual conflict between good and evil. The evil in Christian theology is represented by Satan because of whom Adam and Eve committed the sin of disobedience. Because they committed a sin, we all are sinners and to get rid of it we must follow the path shown by the Son of God who sacrificed his life for us. The whole argument is based on the concept of pre-existing evil that prevents us from doing good. Hinduism has no pre-fixed concept of evil. Hinduism ordains that anything and everything existing in this world is permeated with God and we should not hate anything or any person. Sharma is a voracious reader, travels a lot and knows it well that knowledge of just one language is not enough to become a good scholar or a poet. He says, "... *have grown under the notions like "[one] does not know literature who only literature knows" and "[one] does know English literature who only English literature knows."* (p.325) His wide-ranging

knowledge is evidenced in his use of cross-cultural motifs in his poetry making him a global poet.

The editor's interview with the poet, "Hanson and Sharma: A Dialogue", has rightfully been put at the end of the book under review. It reveals why he chose to invoke the river Ganges in his epical poem "Ganga Mata - A Prayer". We know it well that many important classical and religious treatises were visioned and visualised on the bank of the holy river Ganges and it makes sense if he invokes Ganga Mata before launching his poetic career with "The Door is Half Open." For the poet Ganga Mata has civilisational and cultural importance. Lord Krishna says in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (10:31) that among the rivers He is the Ganga (*jāhnavī*). Thus, the Ganga represents the supreme God with all the powers of creation, sustenance, and destruction. The water of the Ganga represents life on earth. She is also associated with sustenance as the Indian civilisation grew and was sustained on her banks. Her association with last rites of Hindus reveals her role as a redeemer of all sins. Death by water in the west has different connotation but for Hindus death without the water of Ganga Mata is, at least spiritually, inappropriate, incomplete. The poet has profound knowledge of Judo- Christian traditions and suggests towards the mindless exploitation of nature for materialistic purposes. He describes Hinduism as the only democratic religion. Although Hinduism is a value system and not a religion. Hinduism as a value system helped to grow many other religions. Religions do have a value system, controlled by the compulsions of geography and politics. Interestingly religion is not only a value system but a political system as well. Hinduism, as a value system is to remain forever unlike religions that are destined to disappear. Because Hinduism is not a religion, it does not pursue the truth through the prism of a fixed set of beliefs and practices. Feeble value system supported with fixed views and visions are meant only for a particular human group. Sharma, in poem after poem, conforms to his belief in oneness of God and oneness of humanity.

At the end of this critique, it seems appropriate to talk about the nature of creativity and how the poet has dealt with it. The complex process of creativity confronts meaning in different forms. Poetry is just one of the multiple forms of creativity. Creativity, in a way, creates only vacuum, a frame and the reader fill it with meaning that depends on the acquired contexts. Poetry remains in slumber and waits to be awakened by the enlightened reader. Reader reconstructs the meaning by contextualising and deconstructing the bounds of the vacuum. The imagined fluid frame is the finitude for the reader that he may reshape and reconstruct at

his will. The modern reader is in the know that the poet is irrelevant. The digital reader has freedom to reshape the text affecting the syntactical aspects of the poem making a publisher irrelevant.

Constructive destruction is a form of creation. The poet deconstructs his “self” to construct his imaginative world. To comprehend and aesthetically enjoy this creative vacuum one has to understand the elements and factors that attributed the creation of this vacuum. At times a reader fails to fill this creative void, the frame, because he deserts the required qualification, mainly due to poor understanding of the behaviour of language that is used as a tool. The vacuum is not created all of a sudden by the poet, it takes time, years and ages to create it. You can’t analyse this vacuum in isolation and require volumes of data to decipher what went into making of it. Freud’s theory of Dream presumes that there is always some causation behind every meaningful action, creativity is not an exception. Motifs, symbols, myths, metaphors, traditions, and beliefs have collective and cosmic messages and, it seems, poet’s consciousness gravitates more proximately with these omniscient, causations. Poetic consciousness is guided by his collective cultural consciousness. Older the culture richer the consciousness. Culturally rich sensibility of a poet incubates spiritual yearning in his consciousness and deflects against mundane things to critique on his times that has its own cultural social and political legacies. These contexts and related paradigms compel the poets and artists to choose their tools. Thus, the argument that a poet chooses and picks his tools is a falsified notion and holds no ground as an academic argument.

Some of the Indian poets writing in English have successfully liberated themselves from the Occidental Lexicon incongruity which they never needed except for a pat from self-righteous snobbish legacy. Necessity of colonial legacy and outlandish approaches have been rooted out with the insurgence and reawakening of indigenous ontology and hermeneutic. Honest assessments of contemporary poets and their poetic genius need essential distance for it is painstaking to dissect alive, and safe and easy to dissect dead who never return to retaliate. On the other hand, even a critic mastering the most enlightened prophetic sensibilities is a victim of existential finitude. A poet lives in his mundane time as well as the cosmic time and creates his poetry at both levels, at times unwarily. Dr Sharma’s poetry has ascended the inevitable impediments of content and form faced by his predecessors. As he grows in volumes, his poetic skills will find out novel methods of creation and expression.

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