

## Susheel Kumar Sharma's *Unwinding Self* : A Platter of Varied Flavours

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The forty-two poems in Susheel Kumar Sharma's *Unwinding Self: A Collection of Poems* (2020) may be categorised into three sections: the poems that juxtapose imageries and myths drawn from Hindu tradition and English literary tradition, the poems that uphold a mixed sense of the physical and the spiritual world, of a world in conflict with the real and the unreal and the poems of unrest and search for solace. Written in free verse the poems are simple and lucid in style, some short and some in long narratives. The poet is inevitably informal and personal at times in narrating the realities of the world. The varied themes explored through the poems from the day-to-day life to mythologies offer a wheel or Chakra-like movement to the whole collection.

The collection opens with the poem 'Snapshots' expressing the complexities of human life through contrasting images and ideas in fifteen sections with chosen words and opposing ideas such as 'empty noise' and 'enchanted music', 'fish' and 'red berries', 'the sea' and 'the sky', etc. The poet is defining the beginning of a mother's busy schedule for the day through the images of hope, support and moving on: "Rising sun/ Honking bus/ Sleeping Baby/ Cribbing dad./ That's mom's morning." (2) The imagery in Sharma's poetry is bold as modern poetry giving the readers a conflicting yet complete picture of the present times and day to day life. The conflict between technology and nature, and the reduction of human life to a mechanical process is eloquently generated by the poet through the powerful and fragmented images. The poet is aware of the degrading condition of the planet under global warming and other factors ruining nature, as also the misery of human condition in the form of displacements when he says, "Greenhouse reduction;/ Human displacements;/ Withered livelihood;/ Civilization marches ahead." (2-3) The readers get an impression of the poet's mind affected by the grave problems of

modern life like the impact of technology on the environment and the consequences of war on human settlements. The poems provide the readers with varied experiences of making the mind take flight in imagination from the cosmopolitan event of an international Cricket sponsored by the Emirates to the remotest of country images in the Indian context, like ‘frogs in the pond’ and ‘mangoes in the bucket’. This first poem ends with references to the mythological characters of Uma, Vishnu and Bhagirathi, and the holy place of pilgrimage Varanasi in India. ‘Snapshots’ itself introduces the poet to the readers as an intellectual, rich in knowledge on varied subjects. The fifteen sections of the poem may be read as fifteen aspects of a life in post-modern and post-human times.

The second poem, ‘The End of the Road’ is about the poet’s eyesight weakening day by day as he advances in age which is juxtaposed with the changing/fading realities of the world with time. He talks about six spectacles gifted to him as he ages by his wife, son, friend and his eye specialist Dr. Das. He talks about his grandson who thinks that the reason of his weak eyesight is because of his over reading and that reminds him of Milton who turned a blind poet, “He got scared. He thought I was going Milton’s way by over-reading”. He considers himself a burden on others when he says, “One’s reality becomes another man’s burden/ If one loses one’s eyesight”. This is taken as a physical disability with a sense of considering oneself a burden on others. The poet thinks weakening of the eyesight as a physical disability rather than a physical ailment that occurs with age. The eyesight in the poem is also a metaphor for vision and spectacles for ideologies. Neither ideologies nor vision remain static. With growing age one often wonders how the life was spent over trifles.

The next poem titled, ‘Durga Puja in 2013’ is about one of the most celebrated festivals in India, the Durga Puja. It is the most festive time of the year celebrating victory of good over evil through the victory of goddess Durga over the demon in the battle fighting with her ten arms riding on a lion. During this festival the people welcome the goddess as their mother. The poet too has addressed the goddess as his mother addressing her ‘Ma’ and has tried to give a local taste of the setting of the *puja mandap* referring to the place Gopalpur in the poem with the idol of the goddess being installed at a chosen place in ‘a monumental pandal’ (5) with the air inside filled with the aroma and smoke of ‘*dhoono*’ and ‘the rhythm of the *dhak* dispel[ling] the clouds’ (5). The festive situation at the place filled with worship and devotion is suddenly being

challenged and disturbed by the natural forces in the form of the Phailan storm. It either looks like a fight between the gods and the devil- the pandal and the deity both drenched in the rain and washed away. The poet is saddened by the thought of his mother goddess leaving them drained in the rain. “The pandal is drenched in rainwater./Durga Ma’s *bindi* stays./It is time for Ma to return home./ Can’t she return to her Lord next year?” (6) The semiotic sign *bindi* stays despite heavy rains which indicate the victory of good forces. However, the poet is critical about such festivities that degrade the environment causing threat to natural processes and animals. He mentions different animals specially water animals that are affected by the ritual of immersing the idols in the river water. As a devotee the poet is sad to bid farewell to the goddess and on the other hand, turns critical about the external world, the man-made natural hazards and threat to animals. The poet’s concern for the changing environment and the man-made hazards like in the poem ‘Durga Puja in 2013’ further finds expression in the poem ‘The Fountain Square’. The poem is a strong critic on the harm caused to nature and human life in the marble quarries. The poem refers to a marble quarry of Dungri where a mother “is tracing her lost/ Arm and leg in the quarry” (78) which states the sad reality of the working-class people and the conditions they work under with threats to their bodies and life for the sake of the comforts of the rich. The poet makes references to the *Mahabharata* and concludes that time would come to decide the fate of people for such exploitation and the world would face the danger of water crisis and other natural man-made hazards. Describing the importance of festivals and celebration in Indian culture the poet talks about a special day believed to be auspicious from the beginning to the end in the poem ‘Akshaya Tertiya’ when Lord Vishnu along with his consort goddess Laxmi is worshipped by the devotees. The poet describes various activities of Indian day-to-day life from marriage to voting during elections, where people wait for this day to perform new acts or begin anything new as auspicious assured with success, “The father is waiting for this day/ He wants to unburden himself. / The boy is waiting for this day/ He wants to bring his love home/ The girl is waiting for this day/ She is waiting for a new address.” (65)

‘On Reading Langston Hughes’ “Theme for English B” is a complex poem in which the poet voices the conflict between aspirations and achievements of a poverty-stricken boy who is poor in studies. The poem highlights realities of subaltern and marginalized lives. The poet is talking about his experiences as a teacher like being confronted by the challenges faced by a

student from the marginalized community in the manner poet Langston Hughes experienced a situation with the only Black student at New York University. The poet describes a poor student, his living conditions, his dreams, the challenges in his life and the discrimination he is subjected to. The student manages to clear the admission test every time and gets a seat in the university but is not able to attain his degree clearing the final examinations. Every day he walks twenty kilometres to reach his university from his home which is a shanty built above a drain carrying sewage from the city into the river Ganges. The student explains to his teacher how his social stature hinders his progress in studies and career: “I am a poor boy/ I travel 20 km daily on foot/ To reach the glorious university/ Where I am treated like dirt.” (9) The poem is the living reality of the condition of the marginalized section of people who are deprived of privileges and rights further pushing them to the fringes of poverty and lack of privilege: “I am the only person/ Aspiring for higher education in my community.” The poet brings in the reference of Dronacharya from the *Mahabharata* to highlight the injustice and deprivation of the economically and socially downtrodden people in the education system and critiques the caste system in India. The student comes with dreams and aims for a better career with the knowledge he could avail and gain from the limited resources. Whether he is poor in studies because of his poverty or because of his poor IQ remains ambiguous in the poem. He has read summaries of Shakespearean plays in the cheap notes and considers Shakespeare to be a novelist when given an assignment by the teacher. In the next assignment to write about himself he comes with a note telling his story highlighting his socio-economic condition and the challenges in life even to avail the basic privileges. The poem is also a critique on the rise of demands from various bodies and organizations on the right to education and equality where many are seen taking undue advantage of their poverty and condition without any interest and depth in the subject which adversely affects the quality of education in the country. The situation is detrimental to the quality of education system in the country. Much later in another poem titled ‘The New Age’ the poet contrasts the feelings of this poor boy to that of a rich girl who doesn’t want to come out for learning from her comfort zone and life made easy by the modern science and technology. The girl criticizes the atmosphere of a classroom demeaning the system, the government and the fellow learners questioning, “But why do you ask me to come to the class?” (28)

The poem ‘Destitute’ is about the lives away from one’s country and culture into a

different one for the sake of earning a livelihood. The poet tries to be a part of the new ‘alien’ culture and adopts or rather imitates the way of life of the other country. He merely imitates and practises what he considers to be a threat upon his own culture and identity. “I lose my motherland to an alien.” (12) The cultural hybridization is not acceptable for the poet and he aspires for regeneration even at the cost of his life. “The strings are becoming tighter/ The apron is no more soothing/ The air seems to choke/ Me to death/ I’ve to kill myself for regeneration.”(12) In contrast to this, Sharma talks about the experiences of immigrants later in another poem ‘Sahibs, Snobs, Sinners’, where he shows the homelessness of the migrants and their sense of longing for their native land and culture where both the migrants fail to marry. “ ‘I will never marry in India,’ is his/ Favourite strain. ... No Indian Moor comes forward/ To take her as a bride.” (59)

Written with a sense of angst and pain the poem ‘The Black Experience’ is about slavery and exploitation of the Africans by the white Americans. The poet posits himself in the position of a Black who is subjugated and exploited and through the poem strongly criticizes the missionaries who in the name of religious preachers actually take forward the mission of colonizing the land and its people imposing Christianity, new practices and thus, gradually forcing the master’s language and culture on the natives: “Yes, we pray to/ Jesus about our welfare;/And he prayed for more profit/ To the same Lord.”(13) In the same manner the poet uses the poem ‘Me a Black Doxy’ to highlight the racial, social and gender discrimination of a Black prostitute struggling for a livelihood in the United States. “Me works for belly not for death” (14) He gives voice to the woman in the poem who is subjected to multiple marginalization. Continuing with the same mood the poet expresses the varied roles and experiences of a woman throughout her life and her aspirations in the poem ‘Thus Spake a Woman’, written in the form of an elegy.

Sharma provides the readers with a lens to see life and the world closely – both the physical and the spiritual side. He allows the reader to traverse through peoples, diverse land and culture. ‘Chasing a Dream on the Ganges’ is a poem on a spiritual note with the poet seeking peace and solitude amidst the noisy affairs and humdrum of busy life. “To perform a penance/ I looked for solitudes on the Ganga Ghats/ In Haridwar/ But the honking of/ Trucks and whizzing/of cars and speeding/ Buses distracted me from/ My mantra was vanishing.”(24) Taking forward this sense

of dissatisfaction the poet shows a mixed response to life with both hope and despair in the poem 'The New Year Dawn' where he brings in images of the morning sun and a broken vehicle and ends with a new year resolution, "In the New Year,/ I promise,/ I take on life and also death/ With equal strides." (27) Talking about spirituality, Sharma shows the generation gap between the spiritual and religious practices in the poem 'Hands' where the persona considers himself fortunate enough to have a spiritual and religious father to look up to. The poet admires his father's craftsmanship in making sarees and respects the bread and comforts he earns for his family through sacrifice. "His plate has plain/ Chapatis. Ours laced with butter/ He enjoys his jaggery/ We his SANDESH." (70) The poem is a critique of the new generation who lack spiritual calmness and religious depth.

Moving ahead with the themes of spirituality, life, hope and despair the poet talks about the modern world. The poem 'The World in Words in 2015' in subtle irony hits the modern consumerism where everything is reduced to a commodity with market value. The poem with eight sections is full of images both dark and illuminating, ending it with a note of positivity and equality for all seeking democracy: "Democracy has come. / No one will wear golden clothes now/ No one will sleep in the palace now/ Equality has to rule/ Democracy has come." (35) The readers get a diverse taste of Sharma's chosen themes and words in the poem. From the metropolitan and techno savvy world to the pastoral settings of a village pond with tadpoles, the poet takes the reader into a flight of imagination. The vivid way of expression and simple images from day-to-day life provides a live pictorial experience while reading the poems. "The tadpoles are swallowed in the scummy water/ The herons don't have to meditate any longer/ The rabbits come out jumping and run amok/ The dogs lie still, acting." ('A Pond Nearby', 36) From the humble village life the poet attempts successfully to show the transition and difference of a cosmopolitan life. In the poem titled, 'Bubli Poems' he describes the journey of Bubli, a village girl to the city of Allahabad. The poem is a long powerful narrative that recounts Bubli's ordeals addressing various issues from feminist perspective, the transition into a modern woman in a patriarchal society with many other forces acting on her life like religion and cultural norms. It talks about a woman's dreams and her struggle towards success and empowerment and how she is vulnerable to men and situations in life, many a times being shattered by patriarchy, society and religion and finally seeking refuge in spirituality for peace. Another poem in the collection,

written with a feminist perspective is “Wearing the Scarlet Letter ‘A’” where the poet shows how women have been subjected, blamed and declared sinners down the ages in a patriarchal society. The poet cites examples from the past by referring to Eve, Cordelia and Joan of Arc. “Without a whisper into my ears/ You pronounced me a sinner” (54) Another poem ‘Lost Childhood’ has a strong feminist voice talking about the subjugation of women right from the time of birth. The poet brings in references from the suffering and deprived childhood depicted by Dickens and the one of playfulness and rusticity depicted by Mulk Raj Anand and focuses on the girl child as, “strangled/ To save her honour.” (68)

The poem ‘Kabir’s Chadar’ draws a contrast between two ways of life through the images of two chadars, one is Kabir’s and the other is the poet’s, symbolizing a simple life and a life full of worldly desires. “Kabir’s was white but mine/ Patterned with various beautiful designs/ In dark but shinning colours.” (50) This poem is rich in contrastive images like ‘white and spotless chadar’ (denoting innocence) and ‘blood stains’ (denoting guilt and sinful). ‘The Unlucky’ is a simple poem showing the disparity a learned and an uneducated person questioning God in being partial in distribution of intelligence and the poet regrets for not being born at Prayagraj where the learned is held high in society. “Why was God not democratic in distributing/ Intelligence to all equally?” (52) ‘Saying Goodbye’ is about the eternity of time and its power ruling all and everything. The poet moves to talk about the man-made disasters and inhuman sufferings in the poem ‘The Kerala Flood 2018’. The conflict between ‘faith’ and ‘scienticism’ is highlighted in the poem by a reference to the Bihar earthquake of 1934 that had started a debate between Gandhi and Nehru about its cause. The flood situation in the poem seems to be a repeat of the Bihar situation of 1934, though the incidents are diverse in nature. Moving forward with the aspect of human suffering and conflict the poet talks about war and gives three reasons of dissent: ‘knowledge’, ‘Brahminism’ and ‘election’. (57) Susheel Sharma talks about the absurdity and existential nature of human life in the poem ‘Strutting Around’ where he questions, “Who do I hurt/ If I leave this world?/ What loss do I cause to the world/ If I go missing?” (58) ‘Buy Books Not Diamonds’ is a poem depicting human greed which is again another form of cause of conflict in human beings. The books in the poem stand for intellectual prowess and spiritual values while diamonds symbolise material wealth. The conflicts of

materialistic greed often lead to violence and bloodshed. The poet, therefore, urges to buy books instead of diamonds for peaceful and healthy living. The poet believes that hunger can be curtailed through spread of knowledge and not through greed of riches. Following this the poet talks about politicized conflicts in his poem ‘Distancing’ where the commoners are victimized and they lose the battle. Here the poet refers to the Marathi Manus movement in Mumbai where North Indians were subjected to violence and the common people like those who come from the countryside to the city of Mumbai for livelihood are being victimized in the conflict: “The boy from my village/ Had gone there two years ago;/ He has now returned home/ With his bandaged arms.” (69) Writing about Mumbai in his poems the poet expresses the daily experience of Mumbai local trains in his poem ‘Crowded Locals’. Written on a lighter tone and simple style the poem tells the reader about the same people travelling every day on the train who are strangers yet share a strange familiarity. The people in the train from various strata of life, place and profession offers a prism of life in a city like Mumbai, “The local is a maximum experience/ In the maximum city.” (71)

Aligning with these themes the poet has written some poems expressing the family ties, separation, hope and death. In the poem ‘The Soul with a New Hat’ the poet and his family see the gradual fall in the health of the father and the poet himself who is nearing death and everyone else considers it as his preparation to enter the next life. The symbol of candles lit one by one show the various phases and conditions of life a person goes through. Sharma highlights the selfless love and sacrifice of an Indian mother in the poem ‘Renewed Hope’ where mothers send their sons away from home to look for education to build a career and pray for their wellbeing with hopes of a better life of peace and prosperity. “In search of salvation/ For generations she sent him away/.... / Praying for him.” (63) Expressing the love and sacrifice of parents for their children the poet writes about the struggles that a generation goes through which provides a better life to the next generation and this he explains in his poem ‘Like Father, Unlike Sons’ written under the backdrop of the colonial days in India. Despite sufferings and sacrifices many a time dreams are shattered.

Written with a political slash on the ruling power, the poet critiques the trend of changing names of cities in the country in his poem ‘Rechristening the City’. The poet states that mere changing of names doesn’t bring development and prosperity to a place and its people. The poet



criticizes at the end, “Water alone does not make watermelons/ They need some pulp, some sugar/ Some strips and colours too.” (72) Commenting on the poverty in the country Sharma has beautifully portrayed in a picturesque note the life of a poor homeless family on the roadside in the poem ‘A Family by the Road’. The family suffers brutal weather conditions, survives on poor quality food and malnutrition and sleeps on the pavement with insect bites. Though a life far removed from the comforts of living and deprived of the basic privileges there is contentment and freedom which they are proud of. The poor man is not affected by his condition, accepts his fate and declares himself the Lord Shiva, “My family shall stay in the mud./ After all, somebody is needed/ To clean the dirt as well./ I am Shiva, /*Shivoham*.” (73)

This collection has some poems written with personal themes by Sharma like ‘A Gush of Wind’, ‘Coffee’ and ‘The Unborn Poem’. ‘A Gush of Wind’ shows the poet as a lover of nature and helpless in front of the power of nature. The poet is initially seen concerned with the damages done by the raging storm but towards the end of the poem he declares, “I am not afraid of it.” (75) The next poem ‘Coffee’ is about the poet’s habit of drinking coffee which was actually practised by him to counter his friend’s habit of drinking wine. Despite his dislike for the strong smell of coffee he had tried throughout to make a perfect blend of water, sugar, coffee and milk and later questions, “What did I get by rivalling the snobbism/ Of my wine drinking friend?” (76) ‘The Unborn Poem’ is a symbolic experience of the mental process of becoming a poet and how the thought process takes the shape of a poem. “The traffic jam of emotions, / Lines-sweet and sour/ And the collision of ideas/ Don’t let the pen move.” (77)

‘Ram Setu’ is a poem written in remembrance of Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the ‘Missile man of India’ and the 11<sup>th</sup> President of India. The poet refers to Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu the place renowned as a Hindu pilgrimage site and the APJ Abdul Kalam Memorial built on Kalam’s grave site. The poem is rich in images from the mythological past and the present bringing in a contrast between the notions of corruption, war, justice and peace and questions the existence of a “liveable and loveable planet earth”. (81) Sharma has referred to many places in India and its past in most of his poems. ‘Connaught Place’ is one such place that he writes about with a nostalgic tone. The poet presents the poem as a lively experience of his visits to the place and how the city is a centre of attraction for its multicultural and all assimilating attitude. The poet gives a postcolonial taste referring to the city’s Georgian style of architecture and its

mythological connection through Hanuman. He also refers to its history of being home to the refugees of Partition and Chinese invasion. Connaught Place is also highlighted as a place of rich traditions and crafts that draws huge number of tourists for shopping turning it into a commercial space.

Sharma ends this collection of poems with the poem 'Stories from the *Mahabharata*' written in twenty-five sections each in the form of a tercet. The poet questions *dharma*, *karma*, fate and life and is caught in the dilemma to decide their supremacy, and searches for the ultimate meaning of life where he fails. All the sections together in the poem present a very brief and concise summary of the *Mahabharata* referring to twenty-five major situations from the epic.

Sharma provides the readers with poetry larger than life from his wide spectrum of knowledge and experience. Picking up instances from day-to-day life to the concrete realities of the world, from mythology to modern technology the poet is a keen observer of life in and around which makes his poetry address the universal issues. He gives voice to many questions close to an Indian heart throwing light on and critiquing socio economic and political issues concerning the nation from poverty to politics, education to environmental crisis. There are references to *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Dickens, Langton Hughes etc. Sharma has also provided an exhaustive glossary at the end of the collection helping non-native readers to understand the native terms and contexts. The seven 'Afterwords' from four continents, appended at the end of the book indicate to Sharma's reputation and popularity as a poet in and outside the country.

Susheel Sharma's collection of poems is a platter of varied flavours showing his expertise in blending of his knowledge of the native Hindu culture with that of his knowledge from the western world. Sharma is close to the Indian culture and practices and sees a threat to it in the intrusion of modernity and consumer culture of materialism. He uses a number of native terms in his poems and thus tries to *chutnify* English with Indian flavour as has been done by Salman Rushdie so successfully in his earlier novels. Sharma writes on present day issues; he tries to see a sort of continuity of the tradition from the Indian mythological period to the present. He plays with memory and history by comparing and analysing the past with the present. He is aware of the environment and is concerned about the man-made global threat to climate, nature and

human life caused by technology. The poems are a strong critique of everything that is divisive and is against universal values and that threatens humanity. They leave a lasting impact on the readers with their powerful and assertive message of the universal society transcending religious, cultural and linguistic boundaries.

**References:**

All textual references are to Susheel Kumar Sharma's *Unwinding Self: A Collection of Poems*. Cuttack: Vishvanatha Kaviraj Institute. 2020, ISBN: 978-81-943450-3-9, Paperback, pp. viii + 152, Price: ₹ 250, US \$15, € 20.

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