

## A Treasure Trove of Knowledge: Susheel Kumar Sharma's *Unwinding Self*

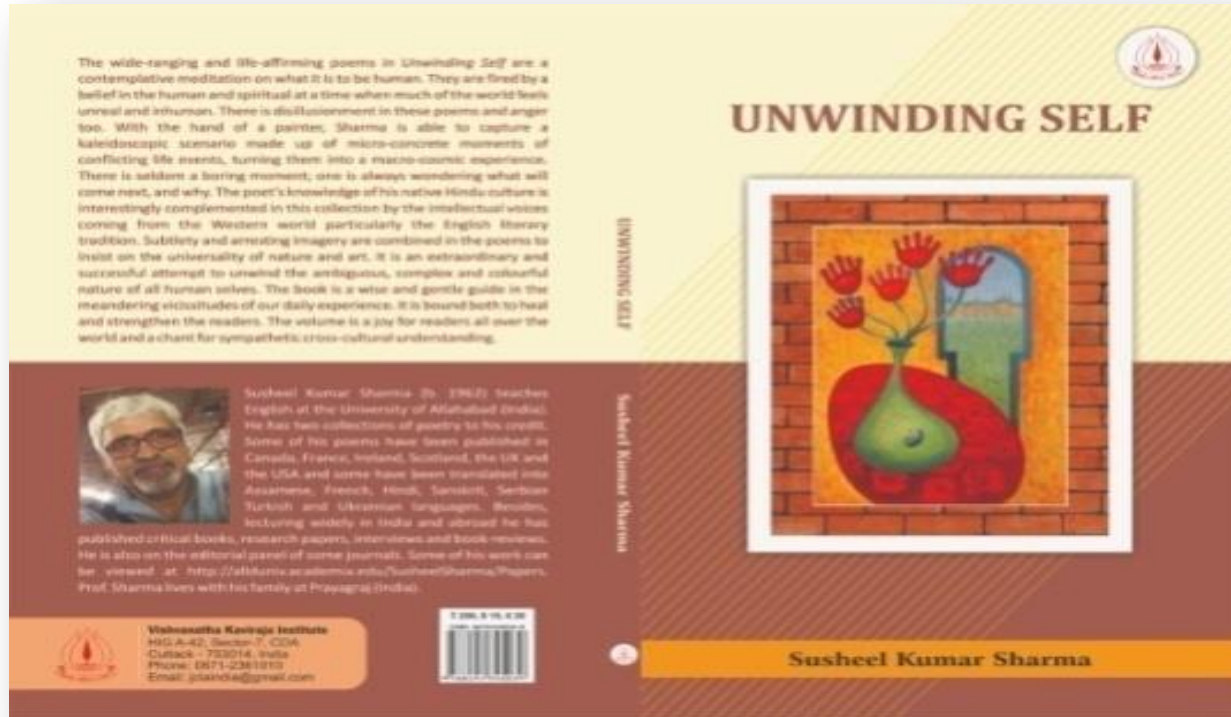
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*Unwinding Self* is the third collection of poems by Susheel Kumar Sharma, Professor of English at the University of Allahabad (India). His earlier works have already earned him acclaims and recognitions as a poet of wide range and depth as well as a man of great academic interest. It seems, while living, growing and maturing, he has been ever busy in piling up his rich experiences, pleasant and unpleasant, in his vast repository for future use. On attaining maturity and developing much deeper insight into the happenings around, he seems to have risen much above the individual concerns. As a man, his concerns and visions seem to have become cosmic. This comes to light on the perusal of most of his poems in the present work. His approach to life is by and large rational and humanistic. It seems, he is a firm believer in fairness of design and scheme whether it is divine or that of high and mighty mortals. In the very first poem of *Unwinding Self*, "Snapshots", the poet's concern for

equality in true sense of the word becomes vivid: “My voice empty noise, / Your babble / Enchanting music. / We are God’s creation.” Over-dependence on copying and distortion of facts ultimately end in ‘crash, crushed’. Plagiarising finally leads to devastating fall. Faith is never shaky. The principle that preaching and practice are interdependent is mostly flouted. The hypocrites become victims of his mild ire. “Tsunami hits Japan. God is resting in Heaven. Where is my old father? Emails will be checked later.” Uncared and unattended burdensome life of majority of women is lucidly put with a tinge of satire: “Rising sun/ Honking bus / Sleeping baby / Cribbing dad. / That’s mom morning.” The so-called right activists and their untenable ideals and claims are put to sarcasm: “A sparrow / Also has a home./ It is taking a rest./ Dhunia strikes the stone hard.” Real devotees are rare but even Deities are conspicuous in their earthly presence. Contrasting realities with myths, the poet makes a sarcastic remark: “I am Uma./ I am Vishnu./ I am Varanasi./ Where is Bhagirath?” Strong currents of cosmic love and emotion cry for truth, justice, and good for all: mighty and small, animal and birds, man and woman, and devotees and Deities.

“The End of the Road”, begins with an autobiographical note but ends stressing on the need of interdependence in life. Living a life of isolation badly tells upon man. Mutual understanding and co-operation are the need of the age. The talk of six sets of spectacles to be used by the poet, at six different times or needs, makes the situation light and amusing. “One’s reality becomes another man’s burden,/ If one loses one’s eyesight.” In another poem, titled, “Durga Puja in 2013”, the drooping mind of the devotees and their inner sadness is portrayed. People’s festive mood meets a despairing end when all preparation made for the grand welcome of Maa is destroyed by the torrential rains. Ma Durga, the Deity of strength and destroyer of evils and Mahisasur, remains mute. She does not come to the rescue of her helpless children. But faith and dedication work miracle. Her devotees gather courage and an abode is built for Ma’s temporary stay, where her damaged statue is put. Storm victims- birds, beasts and men are left to Nature’s care. The poet depicts the heart-rending situations: “Darkness saves birds / From getting chased./ Will the ninety lakh hang hopes on evacuation? / Nature in fury spoils all./ Can’t Ma live with her children for a year? / When everything is pure, what invites calamity?” Faith in all powerful divine mother fails to stand rational scrutiny. Surge of compassion fails to buy irrational faith and belief in divinity.

“On Reading Langston Hughes’ ‘Theme for English B’” is an interesting story of the rise of a poor lad standing defiant to traditional cult of higher education in some premier university. Though being looked down as a simpleton, he defies all the challenges he is put to and finally he leaves the professor fazed with his remarks. The way English Language and Literature are taught at different levels in India, needs introspection amongst teachers at large. It should be at least a two-way communication between the teacher and the taught. Unluckily, it is one way. The teacher passes on gathered information to the taught who receive it mutely. Mostly there is lack of empathy on the teachers’ part. As a result the taught are reduced to passive

sufferers. Those with rural and poor backgrounds, suffer immensely. They get nothing from their domineering teachers but only high sounding voices polluting air, aped accents, ill-treatment and harassments. “On Reading Langston Hughes’ ‘Theme for English B’” presents a lively picture of a poor country-lad and the way he was treated by his teacher. : “He had come like a bird / Looking for a place / To make its nest / Or like a father trying / To gather his self bit by bit,/ After his son’s death.” The poet adds: “And silently / Staring with his blue eyes / Into void of/ A small room of 8 by 10 feet.” Lost into the wilderness of strange surrounding and unfamiliar faces, the lad remains unresponsive: “He neither spoke / Nor did he take out his pen.” The second day was much harrowing when the lad came to class with his hand-written page on Shakespeare instead of that on a novelist. As a corrective measure, the teacher asks him to re-do the exercise as he was told. Aghast at the lack of empathy on the part of his teacher, the lad says, “I am a poor boy. I travel 20 km daily on foot ..., To reach the glorious university / Where I am treated like dirt.” Reading impiety into the intents of the teacher, the lad says: “adversity and poverty had made me indomitable”. In an apparent dig at his teacher, he mutters, his teacher might be victorious in carrying out his insidious designs at the moment but ultimate victor would be he not his teacher. His indomitable will, confidence and assertion are indicative of the rising hero in him. This heroism throws a challenge to the teacher who readily accepts it: “It is better to face / A challenge and change/ Than to be a burden with a life/ Of self guilt.” Simmering anger and the hidden cry of the rural youths belonging to unprivileged section of the society against unequal battle of talents finds expression in the poem. Unfortunately some high academics do play partisan roles, in such unequal games that rake up the healed scars lying dormant in the victims’ psyche. In fact the present poem is a great psychological study as to the causes of students’ unrest in universities campuses, social unrest and poor performance of the university system.

“The Destitute” exhibits unprecedented patriotic zeal and self pride of the poet. In fact it is a kind of denigration of global society. It seems, some personal pricks and experiences might have narrowed down the poet’s views on the migrants and the concept of globalised co-existence. But there are certainly some grains of truth in what he says. Everywhere the poor and the weak are the worst-hit. The poet rightly says, “I lose my motherland to an alien / My business to the exotic /My morals are kept as pawn / In lieu of a job/ That gives me bread. / That turn me slave forever.” But the ground reality is mostly otherwise. Our ancient wisdom says, the concept of mine and thine is rather narrow; to a broad-souled person, the whole world is a family. “... the air seems to choke / Me to death. / I’ve to kill myself for regeneration.” It also goes, hunger knows no morals. It dehumanises man. However the poem is praise-worthy on account of its realistic portrayal of the abominable condition of the marginalised destitute. Perhaps the poet is too harsh on the migrant. Ameliorative ideas are wanting. But the adeptness in harnessing apt diction in tune to the demand of the situation, is

amazing. “The Black Experience” mocks down the belief that God does grant wishes of simple and crooked alike. “Yes, we could pray to/ Jesus about our welfare; / And he prayed for more profit/ To the same lord.” The law of Karma applies to all. *The Bhagvad Gita* does not favour the idea of God being a biased dispenser of justice.

“Me, a Black Doxy” is a strong protest against racial and colour discrimination. It is a sad commentary on the greed and lust infested society. Hunger and not the colour is the main culprit. So are deeds and money. Sometimes perceptions right wrong and wrong right. Feminism and its hollowness are remarkably exposed in the poem. But even now, there are some murmurings against male-dominance in the so-called elitist section. “Thus Spake a Woman” presents an account of a woman in bitter-tears. She is a victim of blighting isolation. Her unrelenting struggle for freedom, honour and happiness is brought to naught when motherhood is cast with aspersions, by none-else but her own born. Some take themselves to be by-products of physical pleasures and have no hesitation in taking extreme steps like attempting suicide. Being oblivious of various kinds of sufferings their mothers had undergone during the periods of their pregnancy. To some even conception was like passing through an ordeal. The woman in the poem, sheds bitter tears, seeing her son attempting suicide. Her excruciating pain is displayed in the lines: “I recollect how painful it was even to conceive you; / Moving from one doctor to another, / One clinic to another...undergoing various operations in harrowing hospitals.... All this was a pleasure?” She feels completely shattered finding her son, a weakling compared to herself: “I was bold to live this misery / Why were you so weak my child?”

“A Voice” reverberates around. What is that voice? Computer has made transmission of voices so easy. With a click the amorous voice of a lover and beloved travels from one part of the world to another. The causes that destroyed or may destroy the remains of an ancient civilisation, and that may cause imminent threat of a nuclear holocaust emanate from ‘the voice’. Likewise a unique creation of an artist makes him famed because some voice works for him/her. A voice can make one immensely popular and notorious. Despite so much potential, man mostly ignores the voice rising within, but heeds to it when it is from the outer world. The poet writes how people are crazy to hear and even ready to pay for others’ voice but they ignore their inward voice. Mockingly he writes: “I am no Buddha / Nor Christ / Nor even Hanuman./ Why should someone pay me for such thorny questions / And sedimented foot-falls?” The voice coming from the inner sphere has miraculous power. But very few have time to hear it.

“Chasing a Dream on the Ganges” brings out the all fulfilling attribute of the Ganga. Most of the Indians look upon the holy river as the giver and sustainer of their life. So they rush to her for needed succour whenever gripped with delusion and darkness. They do so not to pay for her motherly hug, kiss, forgiveness but for the holy places situated along her banks.

Avantika Temple to Mansa Devi, Chandi Devi to Parmarth Ashram and Swarg Ashram at Laxman Jhula Ghat are the great centres of illumination. They get richer and nobler being in touch with the all pervading spirit of Bhagiratha. It was his untiring effort that caused the descent of the Ganges on the plains, not only for the deliverance of his ancestors but the entire humanity. Defying all odds, devotees mostly undertake the pilgrimage of the above holy places chasing their dreams. The poet says: “Here I am in rags / Against your rage / Facing hailstorm / On the left bank of Alaknanda.” Some go there to enjoy the supreme glory and serenity of the place, whereas the poet visits the sacred places chasing inward peace. “The birds had wings to / Fly to the top of the trees / And could watch / The sunshine/ And I went inside / The house to get cosier.” To be rid of disharmony of life, it is better to work for inner peace.

“Bubli Poems” is the story of an eventful life of a country girl, named Bubli. She was the centre of attraction of some rural lads on account of her sweetness and charm. Her bubbling zeal and desire to rise high in the scale of life, ultimately lands her into the marshy land of campus politics of a big university. In the pursuits of glossy life and bitchy fame, she chooses a way to slippery life and horrendous fall. On her first day in the campus, she falls into vicious traps of some spoilt old students interested in dirty politics of the University. Later there takes place chains of ugly and disturbing incidents in the city. Thereafter she comes under public and media glares. Students get divided into two groups, the leader of each lusting for her close proximity. Love leads to jealousy and jealousy breeds bad blood which ends in sanguinary battle. Her bubbling charm involves bigger traders of the fleshly charm. Soon she becomes the centre of charm of the Tennis Association of the State. Her skirt begins to get shorter. “She played a lionised Queen; / Trophies did not matter anymore.” Gradually she gets bitten by the reason-bugs. She wants to enter a temple. Then she is possessed with the thought: “Why does one need to come to a temple? Why does one need to worship? So many similar questions occupy her mind. Perhaps the rational spirit of Trupti Desai lands on her. As she is mentally tense and depressed she is taken to a doctor. The doctor asks her some general questions regarding her health, pain etc. But her past unpleasant experiences of deception make her rather aggressive in reply. She retorts: “I’m OK but you are not OK, doctor! I feel pain but you don’t doctor.” She keeps on brooding who could sleep in such a disturbing situation when so much of disorder, victimisation, chicanery and acrimony are around. The doctor injects her tranquilliser. But she keeps worrying: “Bubli is worried about the growing / Weight of sin around her world. / Neither feminism nor socialism provides / Any clue; a blame game has been on.” Some suggest her to take crazy salad, crazy smoke... hard drinks but to no effect. Subsequently she yearns for deity’s grace. Paying obeisance to the female deities like: Durga, Kali, Mahakali, Saraswati etc bring her no relief. Even male deities of different religions do not grant her any succour. Lastly she ends as a despairing soul. The “Bubli Poems” is a sad commentary on the academic state of affairs in prime and glorious



universities of the country. For petty selfish gains of power and pelf, sensual satiety, slippery rusting life things are allowed to rot and degenerate. Ultimately simple and innocent bubbling soul like Bubli becomes a psycho-crash. Undertones of the poem do tell a lot more about sordid and vitiated academic environment of most of the universities which are responsible for the creation of human resources for the nation. In fact, the poem is a rousing call to one and all to rise above selfish concerns for the welfare of the country. Much more is expected of those, sitting at the helms of the affairs.

In “Kabir’s Chadar” the poet’s rational approach is at its peak. He reasons how a white chadar used by the sage could retain its whiteness and glow even after being used profusely life-long. It incites curiosity in the mind of one and all. The poet’s chadar gathered stains and impurities much quickly though it was of a different make and colour. He reasons, perhaps the sage’s chadar remained clean due to its transparency. He further says, his chadar is blessed with penetrating eyes and wisdom. The sage was well known for his truthful behaviour, nobody doubted his say, including the poet. However, the question still pesters him why his chadar could not do so. On the contrary, it had to be washed clean twice to be rid of dirt and impurities. He writes, “Mine was thickly woven/... Patterned with various beautiful designs/ In dark but shining colours.” But due to its frequent use, it gathered so much impurities that it had to be washed twice. The rationalist in him asks what helped Kabir to keep his chadar unsoiled life-long. Was it its transparent make or something else? Common wisdom says, white gathers dirt and impurities fast. It is still puzzling what kept Kabir’s chadar, life-long clean. Reasoning brings out truth. Anything evading test of reasoning loses its credibility. This was Shri Ramkrishna’s advice to Narendra Dutta, later widely known as Swami Vivekananda. With all reverence to Sant Kabir, the poet’s curiosity seems just and laudable.

“The Unlucky” reflects utmost nobility and humility: the hallmark of the poet’s personality. His rational approach to the various issues confronting life at large, becomes winsome and admirable when it is tinged with mild humour. To him, there are four types of people. The first category consists of such intelligent persons who “understand the contents by looking at the envelope”. In the second category fall all those who are able to tell “where a flying bird would perch and lay eggs”. The third category consists of those who “neither [look] nor [listen] but [know]”. Displaying his inbred sense of humour, he claims to belong to the last one which consists of the unlucky who read and re-read and take months to understand the contents. In an unsparing mood, he satirises himself down by bemoaning his lot: “Why did I choose to be a poet and teacher?/ Why was God not democratic in distributing / Intelligence to all equally?” And finally he speaks with a pinch of satire that the natives of the place of his work that is Prayagraj, are much luckier than him. Susheel Sharma displays his masterly touch while using the tool of satire. His brilliant use of satire could be seen in his ‘Akshay Tritiya’ a very auspicious day for the Hindus. People at large, firmly believe that an act or event performed on the special day attains perpetuity, and longevity of happiness and prosperity. So

activities like celebration of marriage ceremonies, purchase of land/flat, inaugurations of houses and shops, and purchase of jewellery are fixed for the day in advance. Mildly he asks in a satiric vein: what would happen to the doorman panting, opening and shutting door throughout the day, what about an old woman begging money for bus-fare to reach home and so on. He repeats the same query, what if “Somebody is urging others to vote.” With a glee he says, “I shall vote for Akshay Tritiya.” Once again the poet is at his best in adept handling of the poetic tool of satire.

“Ram Setu” is another brilliant poetic creation by Susheel Kumar Sharma. It is written in the fond memory of Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, late President of India. Indians at large endearingly call him: People’s President, Smiling Buddha and Missile Man. As a great dispenser of justice, he did not hesitate while confirming gallows to Dhananjay, when in Office. Being from the religious city of Rameshwaram, Dr Kalam won endearing epithet that is modern rescuer of Sita - Ram. His *On the Wings of Fire* reminds people of his great vision for the security of the country. The poet looks upon him as a bridge of interfaith. In the eulogy to the great soul, he writes: “Smiling like the Buddha he mastered/ The art to ignite minds catching/ Them young in schools and colleges / Removing all heart clots in one go.” Stressing the need to emulate him, the poet concludes with the say: “... Interfaith respect and dialogue are waiting; / Is it so difficult to make stones float and / Create a liveable and loveable planet earth?” The poet’s choice of Dr Kalam as an objective correlative for conveying the sense of a safe and secure nation as well as a sense of justice, mutual trust and liveable and loveable relationships is perfect.

“Stories from the Mahabharata” is the last poem of *Unwinding Self*. It consists of twenty five cryptic and encapsulated poetic expressions or sub-poems. To be precise, these cryptic expressions stand for some major incidents having explicit or implicit connects with 24000 shlokas and mythical characters finding references therein. The first one seems to refer to chaos and disturbance wrapt city of Hastinapur. However the inward sphere is as usual. The opening sub-poem is wrapped in obscurity. The sinners are rushing towards the great sage Vyas to undergo through the process of redemption. Vyas bows down to Krishna to have his blessings and permission to redeem them. The third sub-poem refers to ‘sarp-vinash yajna’ being performed by Janmejaya to wipe the snakes out of existence. But his design gets subverted as Lord Vishnu was sleeping on the Sheshnag’. So Parikshita’s death by snake-bite remains un-avenged. The pall of sorrow descends on Hastinapur on the auspicious day of Makar-sankranti, as highly revered Bhishma wishes for his death.’ Ganga is ready to receive her son’. Pandu kills sage Kindama while he was copulating in the form of a deer. Kunti bears sons with blessings of three different deities. She passes on the same mantra to her husband’s wife, Madri. She too has two sons from a deity. Pandu dies after copulating with Madri, due to sage Kindama’s curse. Similarly there are a number of mythical references which help us search our roots to enable to maintain underlying unity between Nature, man

and God. Myths and mythical characters seem to be special forte of Professor Sharma as they have been frequently used as appropriate objective correlatives in this collection of poems.

Words play the roles of various tools and devices which a literary artist calls to his help to depict life as it is, its grim realities and subtle nuances etc. The apt use of words ensures the effectiveness of the message, intended to be conveyed. The commonplace words have been assiduously used to achieve the desired poetic effect. Words not in frequent currency and usage have been duly treated in the “Glossary” appended to *Unwinding Self*. To help readers have a better and lucid understanding of the poems, mythical words have been added in the glossary with relevant details. Similarly words belonging to the world of cinema, science and technology as well as industry also find place in the glossary. As the work attempts to present a global and comprehensive picture of inner and outer realities, words from diverse sources and cultural backgrounds have also been incorporated in the glossary. All this highly speaks of the painstaking efforts of the writer while unwinding his richly garnered experiences of decades, in the form of words sticking in the vast repository of symbols called *animus mundi* by W B Yeats. These real gems do add to the aesthetic and comprehensive vision of the poet. Strong leaning to the traditional values, inwardness of life and unpolluted rational approach to life-confronting issues win him a special place among literary heroes. Unrelenting endeavour to unearth whence life comes from and whither it goes after its earthly journey helps him emerge as an avid reader of Indian and other scriptures and myths. Abundance of mythical references stand witness of the fact, in the present work.

“Afterwords” consists of scholarly views and comments of seven literary luminaries coming from different continents. Most of the poems have undergone scrutiny of these literary eagles who come from diverse cultural and literary backgrounds. It must be a matter of high satisfaction for the poet that his literary and poetic talent has been duly recognised by all the contributors to “Afterwords”. Furthermore they have not only lavishly praised but also accepted his gradual march to the arena of internationalism in English Poetry. In fact, it is a glorious moment for all the practitioners in Indian poetry in English, as Professor Susheel Kumar Sharma’ is being looked upon as an emerging potent voice in the international arena.

Lastly, I would like to call the present work as a treasure trove of knowledge assiduously collected from different sources. Wide-ranging themes have been suitably treated with great dexterity and skill. Above all, the originality of expression and thematic treatment is beyond comparison. Rationalism is the hallmark of Professor Sharma’s poetry. His brilliant use of satire in a number of poems leaves the readers spell-bound. Finally, I congratulate and compliment the poet for creating something unique, and something out of the beaten track. In brief, I would like to conclude, wishing a bright future and more of richly poetic gleanings by the poet in years to come.



Having spent taken much time in going through Susheel's poems I can assure the prospective readers that it was a joyful experience to read Sharma's poetry and to explore his range and vision which enjoy ocean-like vastness and abysmal depth. In his poetry one will find a perfect "association of sensibility" to use an expression of T S Eliot. Being a reader with failing vision, memory and organs, I was able to steal something satisfying for myself, that's a sense of lasting joy. I feel overwhelmed finding a man who is genuinely interested in the welfare of humanity and is devoted to the cause of poetry. Every genuine reader will make a rich haul out of this treasure trove, rightly titled as *Unwinding Self*. The poems may help the readers in unwinding their feelings and ideas that have remained stuck in the sticking reels of repository of their experiences, knowledge and wisdom. Like me they may wish to read Susheel Sharma more.

### **Notes and References**

All the textual references are to Susheel Kumar Sharma's *Unwinding Self: A Collection of Poems*, Cuttack: Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute, 2020.

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