

A Review of

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

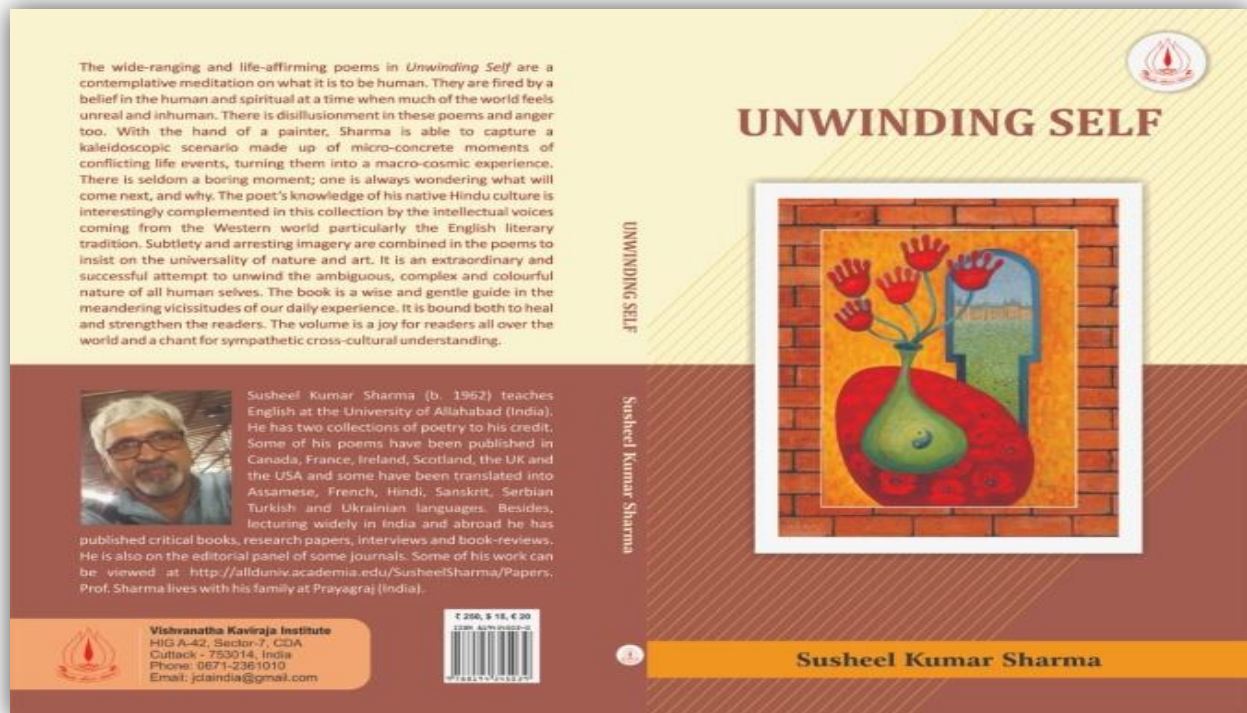
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Like his earlier collection, *The Door is Half Open*, Susheel Kumar Sharma's *Unwinding Self: A Collection of Poems* has three sections consisting of forty-two poems of varied length and style, some are short and more lyrical, and others longer narratives. It is a mixture of poems that touch upon different aspects of human life. It delves deep into the minds of Indian people and touches upon various domains of their lives -- their poverty, ignorance, dreams, failures, filth, day-to-day struggle, etc. Sharma writes about his family, friends, childhood, identity crisis, rootlessness, alienation, religion, God, nature, and myriad other subjects. Susheel's environmental concern is also evident in this collection. In his collection, the poet tries to touch upon problems and dilemmas that our present world is facing. The poems are written in free verse, and are lucid, elevated and eloquent. The poet's use of diction is simple and colloquial, and hence, the poems at times sound informal and personal.

The structure of the book is circular. The collection begins with the first poem “Snapshots” consisting fifteen kaleidoscopic patterns of diverse moods of life in about fifteen words each. It seems to be a reflection on the variegated imageries of commonplace experiences ranging from individual concerns to spiritual values, and ends with “Stories from the Mahabharata” consisting twenty five verses wherein he searches for the meaning of life in the contemporary world.

The opening poem, entitled ‘**Snapshots**’, divided into 15 short sections, begins with words: “My voice / Empty noise / Your babble / Enchanting music. / We are God’s creation.”(1) It offers sliced observations of confusion and complex experiences of our routine lives. Presented as visual fragments, in the manner of Ezra Pound, these casual and seemingly disconnected moments of contemporary occurrences have a hidden message. When this collection of images is seen at a glance, not only give us visual unity and fullness, but also a composite feel of the contemporary times: “Tsunami hits Japan. / God is resting in heaven. / Where is my old father? / Emails will be checked later.”(1) These fragments have a Joycean effect and lead the reader to feel the realm of whole human experience: “The blue bird / Was flying with Emirates. Emirates sponsor cricket. / India takes on England at Lords.” (2) It has a richness of experience. For example: “Rising Sun / Honking bus. / Sleeping baby, / Cribbing Dad. / That’s mom’s morning”.(2) Sharma gives a variegated picture of life. Some give the impression of the way unnatural progress of human civilization is taking place at the cost of man and nature. But the grave tone with which he speaks, tells us about his concern with Greenhouse reduction, human displacements, and withered livelihood. Some examples are given below:

“The river has hung / A boulder in its neck./ It has got stuck in the dam. /Damn the dam.”

“The sky is dark with clouds. /The drums are being beaten. /The rains have disappeared. /The banks are tossing papers.”

“Greenhouse reduction; /Human displacements, /Withered livelihood; /Civilization marches ahead.”

Sharma’s work is distinguished by his inimitable style, sharp intellect, and vision, as we witness in “**Snapshots**”

“**The End of the Road**” is about the fading poet’s vision. As he advances in age, his eyesight begins to get weaker and weaker due to over-reading. At different times he is gifted with spectacles from his wife, son, friend, and one Mr Das. Thus he becomes dependent on others and a burden for the others. Sharma gives reference to Milton, the blind English poet, as he too had become a burden on somebody. He just hints at the physical disadvantages: “One’s reality becomes another man’s burden/ If one loses one’s eyesight”(4). His allusion to John Milton in the line, “He Thought, I were going Milton’s way by over reading”(4) may be taken as a clue. Apparently, the physical blindness of the poet is being discussed but the same can be extended to the spiritual dilemma that people go through when doing extensive reading or dealing with the

different religions. It can be interpreted in a number of ways. Where it's an individual or the humanity, loss of eyesight or vision only makes one dependent, and thus a burden on others.

The poem "**Durga Puja in 2013**" deals with the celebration of the festival "Durga Puja", popular in the Hindu religion. Durga festival marks the victory of the warrior goddess in her battle against a demon. The poet's urge to be with Ma Durga shows his dedication towards the Goddess Durga, whom he addresses with different names like 'Mai', 'Ma' and 'Mother'. He worships her power and expresses deep reverence for annihilating the demons. The poet not just describes his devotion towards the goddess, but he also describes the way the religious event in Gopalpur in Odisha was disrupted by the Phailan Cyclone.

He is simultaneously aware of the environmental hazard associated with it. With a touch of irony Sharma expresses his dissatisfaction over it. The poet finds human ego competing with the divine process: "The monumental pandal / The house for Ma for four days / Well lit to compete with stars and the moon..."(5). The artificial pomp show to beautify thousands and thousands of such venues on an occasion like this has only wreaked havoc upon nature, our mother saviour. This has only resulted in increasing imbalance in nature, and increased occurrences like cyclones and storms.

The devotional and dreamy atmosphere of the first three stanzas contrasts with the sudden awareness of the outside world and the coming storm, and the havoc it would wreak on the lives of the ninety lacks:

Darkness saves birds/ From getting chased. / Tigers run into thick forest. / Dolphins stay where they are. / Nobody bothers the sea gulls. / Will the ninety lakhs hang hopes on evacuation?(5)

At the end, Phailan cyclone is gone, and everything is swept away. The last stanza is:

I can walk barefoot. / A plant in a pot survives with water. / Phailan is a spent force. / Gopalpur summons again. / Who needs free corn? / Who wants crap hair?(6)

The poem '**On Reading Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B"**' takes up subaltern issue. It's based on a real-life experience akin to Hughes's minority experience about the only black student at New York University. The poem makes it incumbent upon us to approach this poem with a prior knowledge of Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance.

The poem is about a student who travels twenty kilometres every day to reach a University and his poverty and low social standing hinder his progress.

I am the only person / Aspiring for higher education in my community. / I have a dream of a better life; / I have a dream of freedom / To change my conditions / I have a dream to love and be loved / I have a dream not to give up. (9-10)

Both poems pose the same request: "Go home and write / a page tonight. / And let that page come out of you - / Then, it will be true." (Hughes)

The poet here is concerned more about an education process in which we need to be more human. The issue of subaltern is an integral part of the process where an entire section of the economically marginalized becomes vulnerable to this mind-set. The education system overlooks such issues, and fails to go deep to eradicate the social taboos that have been in practice for ages together. To bring the message to the readers he gives it a mythical form of Dronacharya and Ekalavya, an episode from the *Mahabharata*.

Ekalavya belongs to lower caste, and guru Dronacharya to the higher caste. In those times the lower caste were not allowed to learn anything, not even archery from the upper caste gurus. Ekalavya was determined to learn archery, so he made an idol of Dronacharya, and started practising archery, and with time even excelled Arjun, Dronacharya's beloved student. Later, Dronacharya, to eliminate all rivalry for Arjun, asked Ekalavya to give his thumb as *gurudakshina*.

A close reading of the poem suggests that the poet has subverted the above story in the poem. The aspiring student just has an ambition and a few dreams without any back up of the knowledge of the subject he wants to research in. He is given two questions in two attempts but he fails in both of them. In the first one, he is notable to make a distinction between a dramatist and a fictionist as he considers Shakespeare to be a novelist. In the second one, he does not mention even one interest when he is given a second chance to show his writing (communicative) skills to write about his interests. He considers his poverty to be the great and sufficient qualification for enrolling in the highest degree. He is not persistent either unlike Eklavya though he is successful in his objective. He browbeats the professor to put his signatures on the form by reminding the latter of Dronacharya: "I'm told you justify Dronacharya's every act / Will you repeat him? Will you replicate him? / In your victory will lie your defeat; /My status will be raised - not yours. /Justice will be done; I have patience for it" (11). How the modern teachers have been rendered helpless in the wake of the social movements and social identities has been brought out very well by the poet. The entire Indian education system is under a threat because of this casual attitude towards learning and a compromise with quality. But, the poet finally takes a very responsible decision: "It is better to face / A challenge and change / Than to be burdened with a life/ Of self-guilt/I put my signatures on his form willy-nilly." (11)

The poem "**The Destitute**" is an ironical presentation of the modern ways of living. It's about an individual who leaves his own country to a culturally alien country, for a living. Living in an alien culture, the individual tries to adopt its life style, consequently leading to an irrevocable loss of his own native cultural and moral values. The persona says, "To hide my brown colour...I dress in white apron... Use a borrowed tongue... My brain is washed away...."(12) He notices that the modern world has no regard for any moral values, patriotism or the native cultures.

But the state of being a destitute is not just external, but internal as well. This experience only chokes his individuality. Severed from the cultural moorings, the individual finds himself completely lost. He makes an attempt to regenerate himself by reviving his true self, but fails ignominiously. The poet observes thus: "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).

“**The Black Experience**” deals with the subjugation and exploitation of the Africans by the Whites. There’s an undertone of anger in the poem. The poet points out how the gullible Africans gradually lost their freedom and became colonies of the West. This was done through the missionaries who entered Africa in the name of spreading the word of God. In fact they were sent there to surreptitiously take hold of their economy. In the poem there are references to the ‘Kingwana’ and ‘Mande’, the two dialects spoken in Africa. Post-colonial African critics believe that teaching Christianity as a religion to Africans was a ploy to achieve their colonial mission. They believe that religion was used as a tool for their economic subjugation. Through Christianity and the Bible, they taught the poor, unsuspecting, gullible African masses to remain poor, hungry, humble, meek, and loyal towards God, so they don’t suspect, oppose, or rebel, so their rich resources could be owned, stolen or carried away without opposition. The last stanza of the poem puts it very clearly: “Yes, we could pray to / Jesus about our welfare; / And he prayed for more profit / To the same lord.”(13)

Even after the fall of foreign yoke, there wasn’t any change in the people’s lot, as their own African leaders persisted with the same system. The leaders changed, but not the exploitative system. Christianity is still taught as a tool to keep the common Africans under control so the new Black masters could fleece them. Here, the poet questions whether they serve the same God, as their exploitation goes unabated.

“**Me a Black Doxy**” is an extension of “**The Black Experience**”. Using slang North-American English, the author gives voice to the life experiences of a black prostitute in the United States. She is in a dilemma whether she should prostitute herself or not for a living. Her conscience and self-esteem do not allow her to sell her body, but consoles herself with the fact that she is not alone in objectifying herself for money on the filthy streets. She ponders over her despicable lot:

Ain’t it prophesied in the Holy book:/ “None eye pitied thee, / to do any of these unto thee, / to have compassion upon thee; / but thou wast cast out in the open field, / to the lothing of thy person, / in the day that thou wast born.”
(Ezekiel 16: 5)

Her struggle for self-respect becomes particularly strong and touching in these lines;

At the dining time / Me not alone? In the crowded street / Me not alone? / They ’ave white, grey, pink hair / Me ’ave black hair – menot alone / There’s a crowd with black hair. / Me ’ave no black money / Me not alone? / Ain’t my money black?(14)

Her dilemma is voiced in a touching way. She pays her taxes and works hard, and still she is a castoff for the society:

How is my money black? / Wages of sin is death. / Me works for belly not death; / Belly dance is no black art; /Me paid fee to learn it with effort / Body turned blue and writhed in ache; / My soul ain’t black.(14)

In the poem, Sharma chooses to give voice to the prostitute; not only to show her exploitation, but also to openly blame men:

He could have spent that amount / On his wife, on his children. (15)

For the poet the issue is her marginality.

My skin is black / My soul ain't black / My money ain't black / Their acts is black; / Me ain't alone / My soul is with me / My God is with me. / Me ain't contaminated, / Me ain't a sinner. / Me is the Lord's faithful bride / And, thou art the man. (15)

The poem "**Thus Spake a Woman**" is an elegy or a dirge structured in five sections which voices the female-specific experiences which men have failed to understand for generations down. It depicts a woman's dreams and her attraction towards her lover. Further, the poet's depiction of women's attaining motherhood through many trials and tribulations is very realistic and poignant.

But, the most tragic part is when her only child commits suicide. The woman is clueless about why her child commits suicide, caring the least for the trauma mother will have to undergo. The poet makes us think as to why a child commits suicide? Or, is this question existential in nature?

The most inspiring and arresting message is in the poem "**A Lament**":

Life is precious. / Why had I to live and you to die? / Life was precious for me / You were precious for me, o child. / Why did you have to die? / I was bold to live this misery / Why were you so weak, my child? / Why did you have to die? / I was born to live not for ever / Nor were you born to live so. (19)

The poem does not end in Nihilism, but on a positive note when the woman resigns herself like Maurya in the J. M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* to the inevitability of her child's death – "No man can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied."

"**A Voice**" is a small but a painful one. The poet is asked as to what he does for a living:

What do you do/To make your living,/Was a question put to a poet/That made me go spinning. (20)

The poet says that there is no reason why the society should pay those who ask thorny questions:

How do they bring grace/That pours on the sinners/From various sticks? / I am no Buddha/Nor a Christ/Nor even Hanuman./Why should someone/Pay me for Such thorny questions/And sedimented foot-falls? (22)

"**Chasing a Dream on the Ganges**" is about the poet's seeking quietude, mental peace and spiritual realization through penance somewhere on the bank of the Ganges. The poet is a Hindu

at heart, very religious and a great lover and devout of the Ganges, Bhagirathi, Alaknanda, Haridwar, and many such spiritually rich places on the banks of the Ganges. He is haunted by the Ganges all the time:

Here I am in rags/ Against your rage/ facing hailstorm/ on the left bank of Alaknada.(23)

The meandering Ganga does not seem to leave me/ Does it follow me ...(23)

But he fails to realize his dream. He keeps chasing this dream on the Ganges, but fails miserably.

To perform a penance / I looked for solitude 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/ seeing the fast flow of water (24)

What is the use of / Coming thus far / For penance / If one does not wish to lose life? (25)

The poet realizes that the days are gone when this was possible but amid the disquietude, and thronging crowds at these places, it has become a dream, and his chasing it on the Ganges proved a futile exercise.

“**The New Year Dawn**” speaks about Sharma’s mixed response to it. He shows both his hope and despair. He hopes the morning sun: “To bring me a new lease of life/ Over the garden, over the fields/ Over my loan and broken vehicle.” (27)The poem ends with the poet’s declaration with courage and a sense of equanimity: “In the New Year, /I promise, /I take on life and also death / With equal strides” (27).

“**The New Age**”, talks about a snobby girl who resents coming to class. Science and technology have made our life easy and brought a sea change to our lifestyle, like ATMs etc. Despite such big changes, not much has been done at the school level education. The poet ruthlessly exposes the economic disparity, seething corruption at the primary school level. The snobby girl is just a ploy for the poet to reveal the government’s apathy towards the poor and the marginalized. She talks about the environs where she is made to sit among the poor and backward boys and girls in a school that has not been cleaned or swept for ages, and made to sit on benches with piercing nails which tear away her saree beyond repair. The poet says:

To be in the company/Of black boys/Who smell foul/And silly girls/Who are not ashamed/Of using mustard oil/Or that classroom/Which has not been cleaned/Nor even been swept/For ages; the piercing nails/In the benches there/Tear away my saree,/It no more can be darned/Spotlessly.

The girl in question has a flaw in her character as she belittles the importance of going to classroom. This comfort loving and easy going girl, likes to draw currency from the ATMs, but resents such environ where all can attend school irrespective of their family background or status.

In “**The World in Words in 2015**” is a poem about the modern consumerist culture and the monopolists or the powers-that-be who created it. There is a touch of irony in the tone of the poet:

Section I is about the all-powerful monopolists wielding absolute control over the planet.

“We name the stars,/We assign them places./We give them values./We value gold and gulf-oil/Not the stars/We are the masters/Of our fate and yours./The galaxy belongs to us/We don’t allow/Anyone to touch the moon.”(29-30)

Section II is about the way these monopolists promote wine, so they can exchange it for petrol/oil.

Section III is about the teachings of the Bible imparted to the gullible and unsuspecting common people wherein they are taught to remain humble, meek, submissive, so they remain poor and can be easily exploited without any opposition. Here religion is being used as a powerful tool to keep the masses in control.

Section IV reminds us of Eliot’s “The Wasteland”. Here Margie and John have been shown to be lonely and lost, seeking not love but lust, for physical gratification.

Section V is about the Media and its role in maintaining absolute control over the entire system. They spread lies and see to it that whistle-blowers are either eliminated or punished. The prophets also met the same fate in the past.

Section VI exposes the social work done by the big corporate houses as a hoax, as it benefits their corporate cronies.

Section VII about the big dreams that the masses are made to buy. Nature is being destroyed to build these big dreams.

Section VIII seeks to explain how democracy, the most powerful tool of progress for the mankind has been sabotaged. It too has been turned into a big hoax.

“**A Pond Nearby**” is about the poet’s environmental concerns. He not only talks about the once-rivulet-turned-pond, but also about spiritual downfall. All the happy activities associated with the rivulet are gone—only a pond with a little water is left. The poet recalls those happy days and contrasts it with the present pitiable condition the pond is in. The poet says:

Will the pond be a river ever?/The mother has not returned home/Has she been lost in the wilderness?/She no more brings food for the young ones/No one is waiting for her.(36)

“**Bubli Poems**”, a landmark in the poetic career of Sharma, is a long narrative about the journey of a village girl in the city of Allahabad. Bubli is the epitome of the modern woman-power. The

poet gives an unequivocal expression to the entire phase of transformation of Indian women from earlier time to the modern time. The last lines tell us about Bubli seeking spiritual salvation amidst her shattered dreams. The poem moves from innocence to experience.

Bubli comes from a village / Where a dish connection was available / Courtesy some Panchayat scheme / Sponsored by the state government / With a loan from the World Bank.(41)

Her problems begin with the dish connection, as she begins to dream big impossible dreams. She begins to dream about the apparently carefree city life as shown on the TV. She grows and joins the college at Allahabad. She is ignorant of the city life, and becomes a victim of the scandal published in the city newspapers. She is in the news and the city talks about the affair of a girl and two amorous lads.

But people holding their earthen glasses in one hand / Sip tea and read all newspapers for free. / The most important news today they discuss is / Of the affair of a girl and two amorous lads, / Hurling bombs and pistol shots.(38)

But all this does not affect her. In her search for freedom, she even readily bears the freakish behaviour of the rustic/uncultured lads, derogatory comments, and physical assaults in order to fulfil her expectations and achieve her individual freedom. As she enjoys the fashionable city life, soon she is confronted with the evil designs around her which make her worried, as she was ignorant of the ways of the world: "Bubli was ignorant of her agony and the lost calm"(42). She also becomes a dancer and a cheer-leader in sexy outfit.

Bubli can dress well now / She can dress as she likes now [...] / The village is hid behind the trees / Who cares for a bullock cart / When a modern car is right in front? / She can make a fast buck in the city of joy. (38)

She could now be nominated to represent the district:

But her dress was a problem; she was playing wearing a / Salwar and kurta; she needed a skirt, / The smaller, the better suggested the coach. [...] / The coach said she could not be recommended / To represent the state if she did not meet / The Secretary of the Association privately. / That she was a lone female in the man's world.(44)

But, all these liberation promises do not work for Bubli. She cannot find happiness in the degenerate city life. Totally discontented with her life and achievements, she now seeks mental peace and spiritual salvation.

Bubli is sitting before her master / Cross legged like Apala must have / To ask questions, to seek knowledge / And to defeat the sage to prove her / Wit, logic, strength and worthiness. [...] / A thousand questions are asked, and / The master gazes into the thin air; / Bubli is bubbling with puzzles.(40)

She visits a temple: "Like many others there / She sat cross legged and tried to meditate. / The questions resurfaced in hordes. [...] /Answers were not coming." (45)

The poet seeks to voice the feminist struggle for liberation in India.

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 blame poverty; some the IMF; / Some the UN; some the environment; / Some the arms race; some the crony's lust; /Some the US's craving for power; / Some the UK's greed. /Bubli is looking for happiness; / How can a worried person be happy?(47)

Bubli prays to all the Hindu goddesses for strength: Jai Kali, Durga, Saraswati, and many more. She seeks solace in Krishna, and Christ as well. She gives up her ambitious dreams of achieving big, so she can gain back her mental peace. Neither Feminism nor Socialism is of any avail, when it comes to women liberation. Bubli is 'waiting for the moment of *shaktipat* from the Messiah' (49) but is in fact 'not yet ready for salvation' (49).

"**Kabir's Chadar**" is replete with symbolic significance. There are two chadars in the poem: one is Kabir's which is white and thin and the other one is the poet's which is thick, coloured and designed. One stands for a simple life and the other for a life full of ambition and other worldly desires. Simple life does not lead to committing sins for fulfilment or gratification, whereas a complex life with its innumerable desires leads to committing sins, as money breeds crime: "How could Kabir /Afford to return his chadar /As he had obtained it?" (51). He searches for the reason how Kabir could afford to return his chadar as he had obtained it. He raises the question for all to ponder over: "Does the clue lie in/ Thinness or whiteness?" (51) The poet stands for a simple life which only requires the fulfilment of the bare minimum needs, and not for the modern complex life full of ambition and hypocrisy.

In the poem, "**The Unlucky**", with a touch of irony, the poet makes clear that in the contemporary time there is no honour for the learned and the scholarly. People with fake scholarship are more successful than the real ones. The poem begins with the poet's question as to why God created people with different talents. As some people easily understand what they read while others have to toil for the same. He asks "Why was God not democratic in distributing/ Intelligence to all equally!" He recognizes four kinds of readers and places himself in the fourth category by rating himself a 'poor' reader. And further, the poet raises another question as to "Why did I choose to be a poet and a teacher?" This question reflects his ironic presentation of himself as a poor reader as a poet's wisdom is compared with that of the philosopher, and a teacher, or "guru" is worshipped, in the Indian tradition. A teacher stands only next to God. And finally the poet complains "Why was I not born in Prayagraj?" (52). Prayagraj is symbolic of the bygone era when society had deep respect for the poets and scholars.

"**Saying Goodbye**" deals with mysterious workings of time. This poem is elegiac in tone and has an allusion to Thomas Gray's "The Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" in the line "When the curfew tolls the knell of the parting day". It's time that reigns supreme. Everything is decided

by the all-powerful time. It's time that is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. Time decides everything. The poem is a delineation of the quintessence and eternity of 'time'.

“Wearing the Scarlet Letter ‘A’” voices the feminist concerns in a patriarchal power setup. The poem begins thus:

I had been created a weaker creature/Flesh of your flesh, blood of your blood./You had tried to put me in the dock/And made stand on the scaffold alone/To pronounce me a weak hustler.(54)

Later in the poem, there are references to Eve, Cordelia, and Joan of Arch. All these female characters had to undergo unfair trials and some of them were even killed, though considered blameless later. There was nobody to defend them, even they themselves were not in a position to defend themselves. The poet raises a question as to ‘Who has the right to pronounce someone as a sinner, evil or guilty?’ The woman in question says: “Without a whisper into my ears/You pronounced me a sinner.”(54)

“The Kerala Flood 2018” reflects the poet's scepticism. The poem begins with: “Idukki dam couldn't take it any more/And the gates were opened”.(55) The poem indicates to the conflict between the Nehruvian and Gandhian ideologies. While Nehru considered dams and factories as the temples of modern India, Gandhi was for rural upliftment and employment through small scale units of production and distribution. Actually this is not a natural disaster, but a man-made one. At such a critical juncture, when there is no help, without any concern for the victims there is talk of ideologies categorizing help as good and bad. The poet hints at the prejudices that have made us inhuman. The poet reminds us of Gandhi's tenets to remain non-violent towards all creatures, especially cow which is considered as a mother in the Hindu and the Buddhist scriptures. In the poem, the carnivores are criticized explicitly, but those who pretend to be herbivores are decried as shams:

If a cow is sacrosanct/And people eat beef/One has to take a side./ Some of the friends chose to/ Side with cow and others/ With the beef-eaters./ Some were more human/ They chose both. (55)

The poet like a sceptic raises the question:

Why were people/ Chosen to suffer?/Why did they have to suffer/ In God's own land?/ Has God vanished abandoning his abode. (56)

The poem **‘A Mock Drill’** is outwardly a war exercise, which eventually would lead to a war. The poet here searches for the reason behind such wars. According to the poet ‘knowledge’, ‘Brahmanism’ and ‘Election’ finally lead to war. Knowledge gives rise to numerous conflicting and contradicting ideas leading to dissent. Brahmanism, a caste-based hierarchy inevitably leads to social and economic disparity. Election, the greatest hoax of the modern times and a powerful tool to sabotage democracy, manipulates public mandate through money, muscle and media propaganda. Human lives mean nothing for those involved in this Mock Drill. It reminds us what the Bible (Genesis3:19) says, “For dust you are, And to dust you shall return”) to show how

meaningless and absurd human life has become in the modern setup. The poet says: It hurts./Knowledge hurts./ Brahmanism hurts./Election hurts.(57)

“Strutting Around” is about the absurdity of human life. Despite tragedies that take place around and in our own lives, the world goes on as usual, not making an iota of difference to the world. The poet ruminates on his own existence: “Who do I hurt / If I leave this world? / What loss do I cause to the world / If I go missing?” He further adds that children are born, they leave home for some other city for bread. The filial emotions diminish, and nobody cares for the elderly parents. Those human or familial emotions have gone dry, and have become a thing of the past. Nobody cares. And now the poet is getting aged, i.e. nearing the doomsday. Despite these realizations, the poet consoles himself and says:

The world was there/ The world is there/ The world will be there/ With me or without me./Chickens get feathers/ To fly as they grow old/ The cocks no more strut around/ Near the doomsday.(58)

“Sahibs, Snobs, Sinners” speaks about the homelessness and homesickness of an English Sahib, and Hilda. In a sense they too are migrants. The Sahib, leaving England, is unhappy and longing for a home. “I will never marry in India,” is his favourite strain.

Hilda, another migrant, is unhappy “In a dull, dusty, hot,/ Filthy, malaria-infested India.”(59) She is aged, and even an Indian moor is not ready to marry her.

In **“Endless Wait”** Sharma speaks about his store of books. He is deeply attached to them, as considers these books his family. All his achievements are due to these books. He has grown with these books. He cannot dream of parting with these books. These are his flesh, blood, soul, and life itself. He raises the question: “How do I handle my treasure/ That my wife considers/ Only rubble and clutter/ Worth a penny?” (60)

“The Soul with a New Hat” has a great symbolic meaning. The poet says that he was gifted with thirty candles by his father. But the poet wanted sixty more. One by one the candles (years) are burned by the poet. Later, his wife, son, brother, and three years back his sister helped him keep the candles burning. Like this he has survived up till now. Now he has grown old. At this age, the poet is reminded of the next life. The following lines are expressive of his gradual realization, and his mental readiness to humbly prepare for the next life.

While dressing like a human/ Being. My next life will be decided/ By my Karma or/ By my devotion to/ The cathedral./The heavenly light is spent/ Fog is enveloping me/ S l o w l y.(61-62)

“Renewed Hope” is about an Indian mother’s selfless love and sacrifice for her son. A mother, whatever suffering or misery she has to undergo, prays for her son’s well-being. The poet demonstrates the grandeur of a mother’s sacrifice for her son’s progress. This has been a tradition in India. For ages, mothers have been sending their sons away from home for better education. The poet says: “She could pass days and nights/ Praying for him./With empty stomach/ Invocation brings results quickly.”(63)

“**Like Father, Unlike Sons**” speaks about the sentiments and struggle of the older generations. The earlier ones had to undergo great sufferings during the colonial days which the new generation knows nothing about and even doesn’t care about. The fruits of their sacrifices are being reaped by the new generation. The new one is comfort-oriented and irresponsible. The poet laments this generation gap: “So many dreams have already been shattered. / Who stores the broken idols for future?”(64).

“**Akshya Tritya**” reflects the great enthusiasm of people for its celebration. It’s a journey through Indian festival, which the poet considers to be an auspicious day for Hindu community, as any venture, business, or profession begun that day is considered successful: “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) Then, there are some people who are seeking votes for their candidate. As Akshya Tritya is a day of fulfilment of people’s wishes, the poet wishes to vote for Akshya Tritya. Being a true poet of the people, the poet does not miss to lace the poem with political and economic overtones. The poem ends with the remarkable comments:

The GDP may go up on this day;
Even, Budia is able to
Eat to his fill; Panditji can blow his
Conch shell with full might.
Outside, somebody is asking for votes;
Somebody is urging others to vote.
I shall vote for *Akshya Tritya*. (65-66)

“**Buy Books Not Diamonds**” focuses on human craving for diamonds, which only leads to more cruelty and bloodshed. The poem asks us to buy books, which will lead to more peace and prosperity in the world. Not diamonds, but books are required for a healthy and wholesome life. Buying diamonds won’t end starvation. It is knowledge and its proper application for the welfare of the people which is the need of the hour.

“**Lost Childhood**” is about the social bias that puts a girl child into a submissive position. The poem has a strong feminist voice for the girl child. The following lines of the poem remind one of the French feminist existentialist social theorist, Simone de Beauvoir:

The girl child is strangled / To save her honour; / A bead of acid is splashed into / Her eye... / To make her presentable. / She is given laddoos to eat (68)

In her classic *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir writes: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” For centuries, women have been placed in a subservient position, and that, with the passage of time the society has become so mentally conditioned that it does not find anything unjust about it.

In the poem, “**Distancing**” the poet speaks about Mumbai in its true colours. From a distance, it looks a dream city. It stands for hope and fulfilment for those who go there in search of a job. But, Mumbai is not Bombay. Marathi Manus movement led to the looting and beating of the

north Indians. They had to flee to seek shelter elsewhere. It is not that everybody is able to have a good luck. Some even return with misfortune. A lad from the persona's village had to return home:

He has now returned home/ With his bandaged arms./How will he eat his food?/ The train to Mumbai is as crowded/ As it was when it went to Bombay./ Why did the boy then return to his village?(69)

In "**Hands**" the poet focuses on his father's belief in the spiritual and religious values he was lucky to live by. There was an age when one could lead a spiritually calm and deeply religious life. They had faith in God and Karma. But the new generation is not so lucky. The earlier generation was thankful to God, whereas the new one is thankless. The poet considers his father luckier, as he says, 'I need to read the lines in his palms.'"(70)

In the poem, "**Crowded Locals**" the poet talks about his mixed experience of Mumbai local trains. He says, "The local is a maximum experience/ In the maximum city."(71) All are strangers to each other, and still fake familiarity with each other. Besides other experiences, he talks about the local crowds thus:

Who is not a friend here—/ All faces are so familiar,/ All have dreams in their eyes,/ All exhausted from day's work,/ All on the move to their destination/ All challenging the menacing world/ All trying to solve some puzzles.(71)

In "**Rechristening the City**" the poet is critical about the political trend of changing names of the cities. The poet is of the opinion that name-change is not going to mend matters. According to him, changing names is not going to bring back the lost glory of those old mythological days. It's through a positive and virtuous mind-set that we can bring back the lost glory. The poet says:

I shall keep you on your toes / You may call me by whatever name / You wish to. I am the consciousness / I am the reality, I am the water, /I am the land. Where are the boundaries ...? (72)

In "**A Family by the Road**" the poet in an ironical and humorous manner describes the pitiable lot of a family that lives by the road, facing all kinds of dangers and braving inhuman weather conditions. The poet says;

It does not matter / If snow in the Himalayas melts / Or Fani hits Puri / Or hot winds blow here. / I remain unstruck by the sun-stroke / Nor does my wife get loose-motion / By eating with my bull. My son too / Sleeps peacefully on the pavement / We have befriended mosquitoes / And the lice alike. Bugs too / Give me company. So do the snakes.(73)

It's not about just one family but those innumerable families living by the roadside. Whatever their lot, they stoically accept their fate and are still grateful to God. The poet calls Lord Shiva as their preserver:

Let me enjoy my freedom./ I am proud of my poverty./ I am proud of my/ ignorance./ I am proud of my dirt./ I have a home because of these./ I am proud of my home./ My future is writ on the walls/ Of your houses/ My family shall stay in the mud./ After all, somebody is needed/ To clean the dirt as well./ I am Shiva,/ *Shivoham*. (73)

“**A Gush of Wind**” is about the poet’s love of nature. A storm is raging outside his house, and he is concerned about the house getting dusty and dirty. But, he is helpless and says, “The AC is no more a help, / I need some fresh air too.”(74) Soon the poet begins to love the wind gushing into his room. Towards the end, he says, “Let the wind gush into my room,/ I am not afraid of it.”(75) The poet gives the message that staying in close contact with nature is the only panacea to many of our worries and sufferings.

In “**Coffee**” the poet talks humorously about his habit of taking coffee, born of his desire to rival the snobbism of his wine drinking friend. Though he doesn’t like its smell, still he makes and drinks coffee. He is trying to make a perfect blend of aroma, water, sugar, and milk, but couldn’t taste it due to its stench. Many questions come to his mind:

Can good coffee be brewed/ Without any whirling?/ Does the coffee taste good?/ What did I get by rivalling the snobbism/ Of my wine drinking friend?/ I have stopped asking silly questions;/ I have learnt to live with it.(76)

In “**The Unborn Poem**” Sharma speaks about the excruciating experience that a poet has to go through before his poem takes a concrete shape. The poem is a symbolic expression of this whole process. The poet says:

The traffic jam of emotions,/ Lines – sweet and sour/ And the collision of ideas/ Don’t let the pen move./ The poem remains a mirror,/ A shadow, a mirage, a stain./ Irony, satire, humour, jamboree/ Stare at the enjambment.(77)

“**The Fountain Square**” is a poem about the environmental issues. The images of Dungri marble quarry from where the fountain marbles are extracted and “The mother ... tracing her lost / Arm and leg in the quarry” hint not only at the resulting ecological imbalance but also at the human apathy towards it. The poem is reminiscent of the ugly reality of the innumerable quarries and mines, where deaths of the labour class go unabated and unreported. The last stanza of the poem expresses the concern for the environmental imbalance caused due to these quarrying and mining activities. The people enjoying the interplay of water, colour, and marble are unaware about the impending water crisis. The poet expresses his concern: “The palace may turn desolate / The fountain may dry up / Is someone bothered? / Does it matter to me?” (79) The poet cautions to mend the ways before it gets too late.

“**Ram Setu**” is about remembering Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam. The poet asks, “How can one welcome light and love / When thorium outshines the glory of Ram?”(80) He raises some more thought-provoking questions on the universal notions of justice, war, corruption as well as religious faith. There are references to mythological figures like Ram, Ravan, Sita and Buddha in the poem. The poet mentions ‘thorium’ used in nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles. In the

subsequent stanzas the poet puts the blame on Kalam's ambition: "The son of a boatman ferrying pilgrims/Diving deep into the calm sea learnt/To catch the huge fish and dig out pearls./Newspapers alone don't supplement income." (80) Kalam's invention would only worsen the present chaotic scenario. The poet reflects: "The luminous sparks he created /...forged the future / Of the wandering devilish souls trapped /In the middle of tornadoes and earth quakes". (80) Finally, the poet raises the question: "Is it so difficult to make stones float and/Create a liveable and loveable planet earth?" (81)

"**Connaught Place**" is about the multi-cultural nature of Connaught Place. It tells us about its open-hearted and all-embracing nature of Connaught Place. Its open and assimilating nature irrespective of race, colour, caste or creed makes it incomparable with any other Indian city. Connaught Place is not just a place for the poet, but a lively experience. He talks about it with a sense of nostalgia. His realistic description gives us the feel of standing at Connaught Place. The poet says: "Novelty is the keyword pasted on/ Tradition. Like a vagabond I have/ Wandered here year after year/ Looking for lessons, home and friends." (83)

The last poem of the collection, "**Stories from the Mahabharata**", consists of twenty five tercets encapsulating twenty five crucial events from the Mahabharata raising questions on Dharma, human dilemma, fate, Karma, misery, endurance, etc. The entire *Mahabharata* can be seen successfully summed up in these verses. The verses compel us to question whether it's Dharma, or Karma, or fate that reigns supreme. The poet seems to be frantically searching for the meaning of life as he feels suffocated and lost in the rudderless contemporary times.

Sharma is able to capture a kaleidoscopic scenario made up of concrete moments of life events, turning them into a universal experience. As a keen spectator of life he brilliantly depicts people's lives, traditions and emotions leading us into their rich spiritual world. The poet reveals all his beliefs, ideas, sentiments, myths and the like through his reflections on his world of values, family, friends, students, and his country India. Sharma's *Unwinding Self* is an amazing and successful endeavour to unwind the ambiguous, intricate and variegated nature of all human selves. This collection is so tense, faithful and stimulating that it awakens the spirit and quickens the readers with consciousness. The book is an impressive collection that is well presented with the craft of a confident poet. Susheel Kumar Sharma has a poetic vision of a penetrating focus and all-encompassing ideas. The collection represents the full extent of his accomplishment as a poet.

Finally, it's a collection of poems that teaches the readers about the world they are in through a detailed Glossary appended soon after the poems in the collection. It furnishes complementary information about the terms copiously used in Indian scriptures, myths, and other writings. The Glossary plays a crucial role in clarifying the nuances of meaning and reaching the international audience. The seven "Afterwords" appended at the end of the book, are proof enough of its worldwide acceptability, intelligibility, and reputation of the poet.

Indian writing in English is about Indian lives and conditions, including the complex issues born of being an integral part of a global materialistic culture. Nissim Ezekiel set the model and others like A K Ramanujan, R Parthasarathi, A K Mehrotra, Jayanta Mahapatra, Keki N Daruwalla, Kamala Das and Shiv K. Kumar gave new dimensions to Indian poetry in English. But the

former ones were not as deeply attached to the myriad national and global issues as Sharma is. The new crop of poets does express a heightened awareness of the actual Indian and human experience, but Sharma shows an appreciation deeper than the others. Sharma is closely related to Indian life and culture, but what distinguishes him from the other authors is that he does not go on harping on the poverty and misery of India for the sake of realism, but is visibly pained and anguished at the malaise of modernity and materialism, which has put India's and the world's spirit in chains. Sharma shares the sorrows about which he writes. Sharma is part of the modern liberal India aiming at a higher economic growth but he is not ready to accept it at the cost of social degeneration. The lament of the poet is as to what use all these modern day materialistic progress will be, if it does not result in the happiness, well being and prosperity of the entire mankind.

Sharma's approach towards the problems of India and of the world is very different from that of the other poets. His type of writing produces a fresh debate about Indian sensibility in Indian poetry in English and will compel the critics to rethink their claim to have found Indian sensibility in the poets preceding him. Sharma, being a new generation poet, despite having exposure to post-colonial theories, times and practices, does not have to depend on the western way of thinking or creating anything thereof. He has by his side the rich and vast Sanskrit poetry/literature. His use of meaningful mythological and literary symbols creates images reverberating right kind of feelings in the hearts of the readers.

Sharma is ultimately a poet with a broad humanistic outlook signifying his moral vision that the Indian-English poetry has produced. His poems are fundamentally reflective of the perpetual existential condition of the beleaguered contemporary man, which he has depicted with astounding artistic finesse. His collection stands out for the remarkable emphasis it lays on the traumatized situation the individuals and the humanity finds itself in. The message he conveys through his poems is that humanity can draw great nourishment from its umbilical cord being unsevered from its spiritual and moral womb even as it lies groaning on the wreckage of the shattered ethical and spiritual standards.

With his charismatic genius, Sharma has been successful in weaving his powerful and moving message for the entire humanity into the texture of his poems with intelligibility, an intellectual erudition, and an awareness of its relevance to the contemporary situation. He does this in poetic terms without losing sight of the human interest with astounding artistic finesse, deftness and ingenuity demonstrating his profound concern for the salvation of oneself and the entire humanity as well. Sharma's poems will definitely have a universal and everlasting importance for their powerful and life-affirming message for the humanity, and therein lies his unique talent and astonishing originality.

Susheel Kumar Sharma has very meticulously and painstakingly prepared a comprehensive Glossary for readers, especially for those from cultures alien to ours. The Glossary proves very handy for those who were not lucky enough to be much familiar with India's rich literature, culture, and heritage. Understandably he does this to gain a far and wider global reach, and does

succeed in this endeavour. As any literature produced by an author is always determined by the race, the moment and the milieu, Susheel Kumar Sharma surely cannot be an exception to this. As the poet belongs to a multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual Indian society, it will not be fair on the part of critics to consider his work as too regional or Indian. The references, at times, to Hindu, Christian and other creeds, besides global issues in his poems are proofs enough for his not having a narrow regional outlook, but a broad-minded, all-encompassing humanistic one. Great works are capable of offering multiple meanings or interpretations. The issues he talks about and the questions he raises not only concern the Indian subcontinent, but also the world at large. All this couldn't have been possible without the extraordinary effort that Sharma took to append a comprehensive Glossary wherein one finds all the difficult and unfamiliar, but relevant terms from the rich Indian mythology, culture and history, for a better appreciation of the deep meanings inherent in these poems.

Susheel Kumar Sharma surely deserves to occupy a prominent place in the world literature. Sharma's collection is an extraordinary and successful attempt to unwind the spiritually traumatised selves around the world. One's intellectual depth and repeated readings of a work help one to go deeper into the meanings inherent therein. In his poems there's always something new to discover. The volume is definitely a literary delight for readers the world over.

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