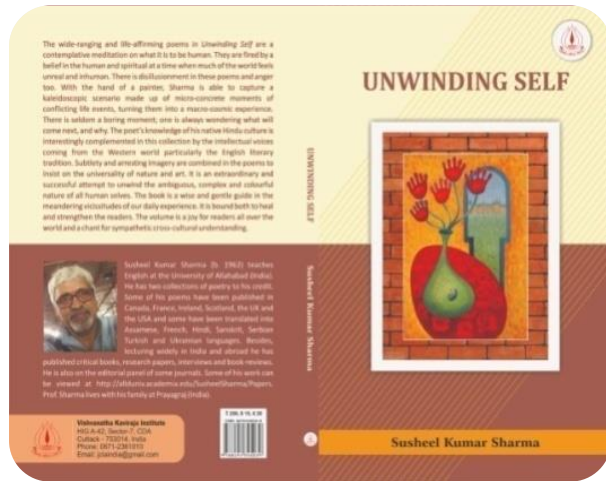


## Book Review

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



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Fragmented consciousness is one of the basic tenets of post-modernity, where the unreliable 'self' finds its way to lurk through the post-modern tensions and, whether deliberately or not, represents an ontological uncertainty by envisaging through curious corners of dejection, belief and identity. While post-modernity has driven us some major distance by encompassing with a range of political as well as personal questions on memory, grief and loss, our unabashed human selves have always remained a spontaneous ground for a constant struggle between acceptance and denial. In a way, being sanguine amidst caveats has become the framework for the post-pandemic world where the loop of incarceration has made us rethink on the limits of our anger, frustration, desire and doubts. While the mode of acceptance has steadily encroached over our everyday lives, the ways of denial have also sprouted multifariously within our inner selves. Susheel Kumar Sharma's collection of poems *Unwinding Self* stands at this particular conflict zone; between the silent rides of the human selves through unanticipated pangs of bafflement, endurance, and ultimately realisation. While mostly being stipulated into his native culture, professor Sharma dexterously circumnavigates through the western cultural pattern also to sketch a universal religious appeal of the many-hued human selves in their most perplexing states of 'being'. That's no doubt a bold attempt to unfurl the repulsive zones of human consciousness by setting the

‘moment’ free and not fixing any pallet of admissible ethical standards. Like a flaneur, the ‘self’ of the author conspicuously projects the desire to take an interior flight in search of a universal religious thread.

*Unwinding Self*, is more a critique of the transition of an everyday-life than a collection of poems which intimately leads its subjects towards a belief and confrontation. Prof. Sharma’s subjects are more often a bunch of disintegrated and dissensus post-modern ‘selves’ which are existing without any motif of association and therefore fabricated within a bewildered framework of everyday-life. The poetic impulse in the very first poem *Snapshots* is a churning display of a conscious urban persona who essentially whips up a cluster of everyday images and observations. At moment, this conscious persona navigates through a series of non-linear events and romantic images like, ‘sea’, ‘sky’, ‘temple ramp’, ‘red berries’, etc and simultaneously the fleeting glimpse of ‘emails’, ‘tsunami’, ‘mangoes in the bucket’, ‘a boulder in its neck’, a cricket match between India and England, etc are contributing to an ephemeral vision of some momentous everyday emotions. A constant quicksilver attitude of this poetic self is always in search of some ultimate question, which remained unsolicited throughout the poem. As we approach the end we finally find the speaker asking the question that is heavily loaded with a demand for authentication,

I am Uma.

I am Vishnu.

I am Varanasi.

Where is Bhagiratha?

The speaker needs someone like Bhagiratha, the symbol of a harbinger who can complement the fickle attachments of the self that of with an extreme dynamic motion of life in order to unbend his consciousness that is pinballing between containment and anxiety. The collection’s commitment to Hindu mythology and culture has firmly been projected in *Durga Puja in 2013*, where the fleeting self of the narrator embraces the possibility of ruptures amidst serenity. Prof. Sharma’s immaculate conception of grief is harmonized with a pattern of discomforts while ruminating over the festival of Durga Puja and hence, his “...thoughts flew away with the speedy wind” and is unable to perform the role of an avid spectator only. This tension is blatantly depicted when the speaker says,

Their fragrance coming from dhoono

Keeps me awake to see

The blood of Mahishasura.  
What was I thinking of  
When it started raining?

Encapsulated in this conscious meandering of ‘self’ is the idea of not being constricted in a singular aspect of happiness that puja brings but also to accept the pale blue eyes of hope and fortune. The narrator’s act of witnessing the rain-soaked pandal creates a mood for an aesthetic judgement on the ephemeral nature of self-contentment that leads to another series of unconnected images which are co-existing with and simultaneously in a non-linear relation to the very context of the poem,

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?

The collection of poems is always vibrant with thought-provoking questions while dealing with a range of themes, starting from women empowerment, racial segregation, nostalgia, and other socio-philosophical issues. That certainly conveys the speaker’s self-exploratory mind which frequently discovers itself amidst some unpleasant moments in regular events. Prof. Sharma flamboyantly deals with the black experience, the issues of disenfranchisement and racial subjugation in *The Destitute*. Here the conscious narrator deliberately talks about the motive behind wearing a white apron and confronts his moral bankruptcy by stating, “The mind is washed away/ From beneath my feet/ I lose my motherland to an alien/ My business to the exotic/ My morals are kept as a pawn/ In lieu of a job/ That gives me my bread”.

Similarly, the emphasis on the pangs of ‘otherness’ as well as self-esteem of the individual has been reflected in *Me, A Black Doxy* and *The Black Experience*. The poet’s sudden reference to the book of *Ezekiel* in *Me, A Black Doxy* has served as a perfect outfit for a typical North-American racial climate –

Ain’t my money black?  
Me is ignorant, me works hard  
To please him; he ‘ven bites my teats;  
Leaves me bruised with hickeys

Nevertheless, the impeccable word choice has constantly been in parlance with the crisis of the ‘inner self’, trying to utter the dissents as sharp and poignantly as it can. We get an obvious Joycean echo in *Fracas*, as well as in other sections of *Thus Spake a Woman*, a passionate desire to be limitless and free. *The Bublin Poems* on the other hand is a long narrative directed at the emancipatory process of a village girl in an Indian urban milieu which is full of deceptive promises, false social code and conducts. To get free, or to emancipate towards the concept of freedom through the perilous journeys of one’s self has remained a constant theme in this collection of poems. Like Bublin’s act of constant self-critiquing the poet also kept on revisiting his personal decisions- “Why did I choose to be a poet and a teacher?/ Why was God not democratic in distributing/ Intelligence to all equally!”. There’s anger, frustration and disillusionment also, but the dexterous management for the distillations of emotions is almost unparalleled as it also makes clear that the poet has an affinity to his subjects and he knows them pretty much and hence the quicksilver consciousness of his subjects remain provokingly inspirational as they touch the spiritual edge of the poet as well as the reader. Being simultaneously lyrical and rhythmical in expression while dealing with a range of internal turbulence the poetic self always fits itself in a world of constant change just like the narrator in *Chasing a Dream on the Ganges*, who keep moving towards the source of the river by eliminating several distractions on his path. But when he reaches there his questioning mind starts brimming with doubt- “What is the use of/ Coming thus far/ For penance/ If one does not wish to lose life?”. That essentially reminds us of Ezekiel’s *Enterprise*. This very act of self-doubting has perhaps become a rubric for the tradition of Indian English poetry especially after Ezekiel. While deeply rooted in Indianness the poet’s mind is constantly in a tussle with a mighty personal force which sometimes formulates a blockage in his Indian way of thinking, as we can see in *The Unborn Poem*-

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.

His “unsoiled paper”, which is a brilliant metaphor for a distinct and unspoilt Indianness, has, therefore, a cluster of “silver hopes”- the hopes of catching the ‘thought fox’ in an Indian web of thinking and eventually fitting it into the patterns of existential biases.

We get the sense of a bewildered journey of a feminine ‘self’ in the *Bubli Poems*. Bubli, being the archetypal symbol of femininity, showcases a typical Blakean charm in the transformation from her innocence to the experienced state of being. She hails from a village and doesn’t become aware of her femininity till she comes to the city, which is Prayagraj for quite obvious reason. Before Bubli being situated in the meandering mazes of city life, prof. Sharma’s eloquent use of free-verse technique let the reader effortlessly visualise the urban Indian scenario, where, “the newspaper vendors sit cross-legged/ Mourning with their piles,/ waiting for a customer/ To buy a paper, local or national/ But people holding their earthen glasses in one hand/ Sip tea and read all newspapers for free”. While a majority of the poems reflect the use of free verse, the *Bubli Poems*, especially in its aspiration of projecting a universal feminine self, has attained a fluid and mercurial quality by being simplistic and precipitous. The images of the feminist liberation inside a masculine Indian society does not go unnoticed without a ritualistic fervour. As if the process of feminist liberation is a ritual of diluting the ‘body’ and the ‘self’ of a woman amongst the male voyeur. The ironic projection of a masculine society remained a constant theme in this particular poem. After torrentially experimenting with her dress codes and its social reception, Bubli and her female ‘body’ remain unable to get free of the male gaze. While the gazes belong to a wide-ranging institutions of society—from the media to health organizations—they collectively represents a society of voyeur which ironically worships the goddess ‘Kali’ or ‘Durga’ or ‘Jaggadhatri’ to gain ‘Shakti’ or power. Bubli goes to those same gods along with all the Christian and Muslim gods with an infinite series of questions only not be answered-

Bubli was muttering, “Jai Kali,  
Jai Mahakali, Jai Ma, Jai Jagaddhatri,  
Save me, save the world.”

The goddess does not come with a flash;

The poet’s responsibility towards these social issues reminds us of Auden, as the poetic-self here is outspokenly anti-romantic in nature and blatantly uses colloquial speeches to maintain authenticity in his depiction of a society which is sustaining orthodoxy. We see the local people having their morning gossip in front of a ‘chai shop’(tea shop) while discussing the exciting

event of an affair between two guys and a girl in the locality. While Bubli observes this event, she is still bubbling or in a state of confusion and pondering over the inability of being free. With a dexterous projection of wit, the poet throws the question to the reader by saying,

She does not know why;  
 The lads are being looked for  
 You perhaps know why.

Bubli's anxious waiting for the messiah, who can lead her to the pool of oblivion to forget the pangs of this confused existence, never ends, because she only cares for freedom and does not bother the form it comes with,

For these are just the names.  
 Freedom is all that she cares for,  
 What she has been aspiring for is Mukti  
 What she has been waiting for is Moksha.

It can be 'mukti' or 'moksha' and may sound different, while in reality, these two are a distinct set of ideologies, to Bubli, the essence of being free is the matter of only concern. Hence, she is unable to decide whether she is ready for salvation at all, as because her conscious self hasn't been able to live freedom so far and therefore remains unable to imagine the very idea of salvation. Also, by using such words like 'bhajan', 'dhunu' 'mukti', 'moksha', 'karma' and many other colloquial names of gods, like Saraswati, Kali or Durga, and other famous Indian personalities, the poet engages his reader into a direct confrontation with a stark Indian reality where like Bubli, all of us are waiting for the revelation or in search for the great teacher and simultaneously confused about our conscious choices and decisions.

*Kabir's Chadar*, is another example of a brilliant free-verse which attempts for a symbolic transformation of everyday objects and displays a series of provokingly thoughtful questions. 'Chadar', once again, a colloquial for a 'stoll', is an impeccable choice for comparison and contrast between the poet and Kabir. A 'chadar', which is an everyday object of cloth, has been symbolised as an enraptured facade of our self, which we wear to hide the tainted spots of wound, pain and guilt. Kabir, the mystic poet and his thin white 'chadar' is in constant contrast with the poet's thick colourful 'chadar'. The poet finds out that a human-self which can never remain spotless and goes on saying—

However careful one is  
 In keeping it spotless

It gets a spot or two  
Which are pointed out  
Even by a blind from a distance.

Unlike Kabir, the symbol of simplicity and profoundness, our inside is marked by vicious loops of desires and earthly cravings and there are so many black spots of disasters and misdeeds that it goes unnoticed of us. But the poet, like a conscious director of this theatre of humanity, sarcastically and metaphorically depicts those spots which we claim to be free of and therefore find our 'chadar' or 'self' spotless in a very self-imposing manner-

Even the blood stains of abortion  
The burn marks of jealousy  
The blotches of over-ambition  
The pigments of infamy  
The splatter of calumny  
The spatter of canards  
The invectives of distrust  
Go unnoticed on mine.

Sometimes we try to wash the guilt off of the symbolic 'chadar' as the poet gives it to his washerman for a cleaning, which is once again a symbol of the human effort of cleansing our tainted deeds, only to be experiencing unchanging colour of it. Hence, he puts forward a very rhetorical and open-ended question directed to his reader, allotting their spaces as a human individual to think on the question by standing on their own ground, that—

How could Kabir  
Afford to return his chadar  
As he had obtained it?  
Does the clue lie in  
Thinness or whiteness?

Those are simple questions but their answers are poignant and that poignancy has been enacted by the eloquence of his use of free verse technique, especially the stanzaic pattern and rhythmic cadences. Generally, the poet's stanzaic divisions in the collection are very calculative and economic as well and do not get governed by the poetic whim. Examples can be drawn from another poem *The Kerala Flood 2018*, where the narrator is accusing the God constantly and evokes his passionate outcry for an 'order', and leaves the breath of his anger by confronting



his tiredness,

Why did they have to suffer  
In God's own land?  
Has God vanished abandoning his abode?  
Is He vacationing in some better haven?  
Leaving his incapable chowkidars behind?  
How long will God be away?  
Some day He has to return to establish order.  
The proxies are no good.

I am scared.

We can see the verse formats here are based upon cadences, comprising sudden intonational rise and fall which is allowing the reader to justify the pause before the last sentence.

It is no surprise that the collection ends in a very cyclic fashion by remaining structurally indifferent to the first poem. *Stories from The Mahabharata* are rather 'snapshots' than stories. With a gifted hand of an experienced artist, the poet delineates the vignettes of his entire volume of poetry into a single poem. Here, in this poem, the poet's selection of each of the images from *The Mahabharata* not only bears a philosophical depth in association with the issues of complex human selves but also leads to a deeper layer of understanding on the futility of concealment. The last two lines of the poem, where the narrator says "[D]ancing is necessary/ To the tune of the flute", is certainly a clarion call for a regeneration of the dishevelled human psyche. The mantra of '*charaibeti*' or 'keep going on' is the wisdom offered by the most poignant artistic creations and Prof. Sharma's effort does not become an exception to that mantra. His process of unbending the 'self' attempts at a daunting unison between memory and time. The poet, being honest and profound in his depiction of human sufferings, has seamlessly communicated with his readers through a lucid and carefree use of language. Apart from being allusive and metaphorical in approach, the completeness of a poet depends majorly with the communicating process between the poetic-self and the reader. The contemporary Indian English poet Susheel Kumar Sharma retains a stronghold on that very ground of communication which leads to the open doors of perception to his readers where they find themselves rekindled with a fresh thought on their everyday observations.