

Echoes of Existence: Deciphering the Layers of *Unwinding Self*

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive thematic appraisal of Susheel Kumar Sharma's poetry collection, *Unwinding Self* (2020). Dr. Patil explores the central metaphor of "unwinding," characterizing it as a teleological process of shedding societal and psychological constraints to reveal an authentic ontological state. The analysis delves into the collection's multifaceted layers, ranging from deep spiritual contemplation and mythological resonance to pointed social commentary on modern alienation and justice. By highlighting Sharma's ability to bridge traditional Indian philosophical heritage with the complexities of a globalized, rapidly changing world, the review evaluates the formal versatility and vivid imagery that define the anthology. Ultimately, the paper positions *Unwinding Self* as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English poetry, offering a nuanced interplay between the personal journey of self-discovery and the universal human condition.

Keywords: *Unwinding Self*, Self-Discovery, Contemporary Indian Poetry, Ontological Identity, Social Commentary, Thematic Versatility

The poetry collection *Unwinding Self* by Susheel Kumar Sharma is a profound and multifaceted exploration of the human experience, delving into themes of identity, spirituality, social commentary, and the complexities of the modern world. Sharma's poetic voice synthesizes diverse perspectives, drawing upon philosophical traditions, mythological narratives, and contemporary socio-political observations. Susheel Kumar Sharma's poetry collection *Unwinding Self* is a rich tapestry that weaves together diverse themes, perspectives, and narrative styles. Through this anthology, the poet takes the reader on a captivating journey, exploring the complexities of human experiences, social issues, and the search for meaning and identity. Central to the collection is a teleological movement toward self-discovery and the deconstruction of societal constraints. The anthology interrogates the fluid nature of identity and belonging within the context of rapid globalization.

Thematic Exploration

The overarching theme of *Unwinding Self* revolves around the notion of self-discovery, personal growth, and the process of shedding societal and psychological constraints to uncover one's authentic being. This theme is manifested through various sub-themes that the poet skilfully navigates.

Social Consciousness and Critique: Sharma's poetry exhibits a keen awareness of social and political realities, often serving as a mirror to the ills plaguing contemporary society. Poems like "The Destitute" and "The Black Experience" delve into issues of marginalization, exploitation, and the struggles faced by the oppressed. The poet's ability to give voice to the voiceless and shine a light on the harsh realities of the human condition is a testament to his social consciousness.

Gender Dynamics and Empowerment: Several poems in the anthology explore the complexities of gender roles, power dynamics, and the journey towards empowerment. The character of Bubli, who appears in a series of poems, embodies the struggles and aspirations of a young woman navigating the patriarchal structures of society. Poems like "Me, A Black Doxy" and the "Bubli Poems" series offer a nuanced exploration of the female experience, shedding light on the challenges and resilience of women.

Spiritual Inquiry and Philosophical Contemplation: Alongside the social and political themes, Sharma's poetry delves into the realm of spirituality and philosophical exploration. Poems like "Chasing a Dream on the Ganges" and "The New Year Dawn" reflect the poet's engagement with questions of the divine, the search for meaning, and the individual's relationship with the larger cosmic order.

Artistic Expression and Creativity: The anthology also celebrates the power of artistic expression and the creative spirit. Poems like "The Unborn Poem" and "What do you do / To make your living" explore the nature of poetry, the role of the artist, and the value of creative pursuits in the face of practical concerns.

Narrative Techniques and Poetic Devices

Sharma's poetic style in *Unwinding Self* is marked by a versatile and innovative approach, showcasing his command over various narrative techniques and poetic devices.

Narrative Diversity: The collection presents a range of narrative perspectives, including first-person accounts, third-person omniscient narration, and the incorporation of dialogues and monologues. This diversity in narrative voice allows the poet to explore different facets of human experience and facilitate a deeper engagement with the subject matter.

Symbolism and Imagery: Sharma's poetry is replete with rich symbolism and vivid imagery that contribute to the overall thematic depth and aesthetic appeal of the work. The recurrent motifs of the Ganges, birds, colors, and natural elements serve as symbolic representations of the human condition, spiritual aspirations, and the interconnectedness of the natural and the metaphysical realms.

Intertextuality and Literary Allusions: The anthology draws upon a tapestry of literary and cultural references, seamlessly weaving in allusions to mythological figures, religious texts, and works of literature. This intertextual approach adds layers of meaning and invites the reader to engage with the broader cultural and intellectual landscape that informs the poet's creative vision.

Poetic Forms and Experimentation: While the collection predominantly features free verse, Sharma also experiments with different poetic forms, such as the use of prose poems and the integration of visual elements like the “Mermaid” artifact. This formal experimentation contributes to the overall dynamism and versatility of the anthology, showcasing the poet’s command over various poetic techniques.

Exploration of Key Themes

The Destitute and the Marginalized

In poems like “The Destitute” and “The Black Experience,” Sharma shines a spotlight on the plight of the oppressed and the marginalized, drawing attention to the systemic inequalities and the dehumanizing forces that constrain their lives. The speaker in “The Destitute” is a dislocated individual, who has been stripped of their identity, cultural roots, and moral agency in the pursuit of material gains and social status. The poem powerfully conveys the sense of alienation and the loss of one’s fundamental being, as the speaker laments, “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.”

Similarly, “The Black Experience” offers a poignant perspective on the experiences of Black individuals, who are subjected to the dehumanizing gaze of the white oppressor. The poem’s vivid descriptions of the speaker’s encounters with the “short and plump bully trader / Who called himself / A follower of Jesus / And thought himself / To be an angel of mercy” convey the stark realities of racial prejudice and the denial of basic human dignity. The juxtaposition of the speaker’s use of their native tongue, “Kingwana,” with the oppressor’s language reflects the cultural and linguistic chasm that separates the two worlds, further emphasizing the dehumanizing effects of systemic racism.

These poems serve as a powerful indictment of societal structures that perpetuate marginalization and exploitation, inviting the reader to confront the harsh realities faced by the destitute and the oppressed.

Gender Dynamics and the Bubli Poems

The anthology’s exploration of gender dynamics is perhaps most vividly manifested in the “Bubli Poems” sequence, which chronicles the journey of a young woman navigating the complexities of societal expectations, personal aspirations, and the quest for self-discovery. The character of Bubli serves as a microcosm of the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society. The poems depict Bubli’s transitions from a naïve village girl to a college student, an aspiring athlete, and a social activist, each stage revealing the various societal pressures and constraints she must confront.

In the first poem of the sequence, Bubli is portrayed as an innocent, “bubbling” with joy and wonder, unaware of the societal norms and expectations that will soon confront her. As the narrative progresses, the reader witnesses Bubli’s gradual awakening to the realities of

gender discrimination, whether it is the policing of her attire, the objectification of her body, or the restrictions placed on her freedom of expression and personal choices.

Poems like “Bubli is a leader” and “Bubli comes from a village” explore the tensions between Bubli’s newfound independence and the traditional values upheld by her family and community. The poet presents these conflicts not as a simplistic binary, but rather as a nuanced exploration of the challenges faced by women who dare to assert their autonomy and challenge the status quo. The “Bubli Poems” series also delves into the deeper philosophical and spiritual dimensions of Bubli’s journey, as she grapples with questions of identity, the nature of freedom, and the role of education and social institutions. In these poems, Sharma masterfully weaves together the personal and the universal, inviting the reader to reflect on the larger societal and existential implications of Bubli’s experiences.

Spiritual Inquiry and the Search for Meaning

Alongside the social and political themes, *Unwinding Self* engages in a deeper exploration of spiritual and philosophical questions. Poems like “Chasing a Dream on the Ganges” and “The New Year Dawn” reflect the poet’s preoccupation with the search for meaning, the individual’s relationship with the divine, and the quest for personal and cosmic harmony. In “Chasing a Dream on the Ganges,” the speaker undertakes a physical and metaphorical journey along the sacred river, seeking solace, enlightenment, and a deeper connection with the divine. The poem’s vivid descriptions of the natural landscape, the speaker’s interactions with various religious and cultural symbols, and the underlying sense of longing and spiritual yearning create a powerful meditative quality.

Similarly, “The New Year Dawn” presents the speaker’s reflections on the dawn of a new year, imbued with a sense of hope, renewal, and a desire to embrace both life and death with equanimity. The invocation of the “three magi” and the speaker’s yearning to be “lifted” and “placed at the altar” evoke a universal longing for transcendence and the possibility of achieving a state of grace. Throughout these poems, Sharma explores the tension between the material and the spiritual, the individual and the cosmic, and the search for a harmonious integration of the self with the divine. The poet’s use of religious and mythological references, as well as his engagement with philosophical questions, add depth and complexity to the thematic exploration of spirituality and the human condition.

The Power of Art and Creative Expression

In “The Unborn Poem,” the poet presents the act of writing poetry as a dynamic, almost metaphysical process, where the cursor on the screen becomes a metaphor for the creative impulse, shifting “quickly / From one position to another.” The poem explores the interplay between the technical aspects of writing and the elusive, intuitive nature of artistic creation, where the “metaphor remains incomplete” and the “poem has to start afresh.”

Similarly, “What do you do / To make your living” delves into the role of the artist and the value of creative pursuits in the face of practical concerns. The poem’s questioning

tone and the speaker's marvel at the artist's ability to create meaning from the seemingly mundane or abstract elements of the world reflect the poet's own engagement with the purpose and significance of artistic expression. These poems not only celebrate the creative process but also serve as a commentary on the challenges and societal perceptions faced by artists. Sharma's exploration of these themes adds an additional layer of self-reflection and meta-poetic commentary to the anthology, inviting the reader to consider the very nature and purpose of artistic creation.

In the poem, "Kabir's Chadar," the poet contrasts his own patterned and ornate shawl with Kabir's simple, white one, reflecting on the idea of shedding the layers of one's identity to uncover the true essence within. The poem suggests that the poet's own "chadar," or shawl, serves as a metaphor for the intricate and often burdensome constructs we build around ourselves, which can obscure our authentic being. The contrast between Kabir's white shawl and the poet's multi-patterned one is a powerful symbol, highlighting the tension between simplicity and complexity in the pursuit of self-knowledge. Kabir's shawl, with its lack of adornment, represents a purity and directness that the poet's own life lacks. The lines "Who at a young age would like / To exchange it with a white one?" suggest a certain reluctance to let go of the trappings of identity, even as the poet recognizes their limitations.

As the poem progresses, the poet contemplates the challenges of maintaining the pristine whiteness of Kabir's shawl, noting that "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." This vivid imagery underscores the poet's own struggles with the complexities of life, the stains and blemishes that accumulate on the metaphorical shawl of the self.

The idea of "unwinding" the self is further explored in poems such as "The Unlucky" and "The Soul with a New Hat." In "The Unlucky," the poet grapples with the frustration of being unable to fully comprehend the meaning of the texts he reads, likening himself to those who "keep the text on the table for months and / Then shelve it for months." This metaphor is a poignant reflection on the challenges of self-understanding, the ways in which we can become entangled in our own thoughts and struggles to make sense of the world.

The final line about Prayagraj (erstwhile Allahabad) "Why was I not born in Prayagraj?" is especially significant. Prayagraj is historically known as a centre of learning and literature in India, often associated with great poets and scholars. The poet's wish to have been born there suggests a belief that location might have granted him better intellectual capabilities or opportunities.

The repetition of "poor me" emphasizes the speaker's self-pity, but also creates a sense of dark humour. The irony lies in the fact that this very act of self-aware reflection is itself poetic - the speaker has created an effective poem about his supposed inability to understand texts. However, there's an underlying paradox: the speaker's ability to articulate these struggles so eloquently suggests he might be more capable than he gives himself credit

for. The ending thus becomes both a confession of perceived inadequacy and an unconscious demonstration of poetic skills.

Similarly, in “The Soul with a New Hat,” the poet uses the imagery of a diminishing supply of candles to represent the gradual depletion of one’s life force, the slow “unwinding” of the self. The poem’s title further reinforces the notion of the self as a fluid, ever-changing entity, donning new “hats” or identities as it navigates the journey of life.

In this masterfully crafted tribute to Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the poet orchestrates a remarkable synthesis of mythology, history, and contemporary reality, creating a work that transcends mere biographical homage. The poem’s genius lies in its sophisticated layering of narratives, where the ancient story of Ram Setu serves as both literal and metaphorical framework for examining the life of one of India’s most beloved figures. Through this ambitious parallel, the poet illuminates the extraordinary journey of a humble boatman’s son who would ultimately guide his nation’s scientific destiny.

The work’s free verse structure, with its deliberate irregularity and fluid movement between timeframes, mirrors the complex interplay of tradition and modernity that characterized Kalam’s life. Particularly striking is the poet’s use of water imagery – the sea, waves, and floating stones – which creates a sustained metaphorical current throughout the piece, suggesting both purification and the fluid nature of transformation. This masterful handling of imagery reaches its apex in the juxtaposition of “thorium” with “the glory of Ram,” a collision of worlds that encapsulates India’s contemporary struggles with modernization.

What elevates this work beyond mere biographical poetry is its unflinching engagement with moral and philosophical questions. The reference to the Dhananjay case, for instance, serves as a powerful meditation on justice and mercy, drawing parallel between mythological and contemporary moral dilemmas. The poet’s treatment of these themes displays remarkable subtlety, avoiding didacticism while maintaining intellectual rigor.

Perhaps the most significant achievement of the poem is its exploration of identity transformation. The evolution from “Chhotu” to “Kalam,” and “Lingam” to “Ramalingam” represents not merely personal transformation but a larger cultural synthesis. This is reinforced through the masterful use of parallel constructions, notably in the lines “Ram was left alone in Ayodhya. / Abdul was deserted by friends in Delhi.” Such parallels serve to underscore the universal nature of leadership’s burdens across religious and temporal boundaries.

The poem’s conclusion, with its questioning of the possibility of making “stones float,” brilliantly recalls both the mythological construction of Ram Setu and the scientific achievements of Kalam’s career. This final image serves as a powerful metaphor for the seemingly impossible task of reconciling India’s various contradictions – between tradition and progress, between different faiths, between scientific advancement and spiritual growth.

The poet suggests that Kalam's life itself served as a bridge between these apparent opposites, much like the ancient *Ram Setu* bridged two lands.

In its ambitious scope and skilled execution, this poem stands as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian poetry in English. It successfully elevates the biographical to the universal, using Kalam's life as a lens through which to examine larger questions about national identity, progress, and the possibility of synthesizing seemingly contradictory elements of modern Indian experience. The poem's achievement lies not just in its tribute to a remarkable individual, but in its illumination of the broader cultural and spiritual questions that continue to shape the subcontinent's destiny.

Social commentary in "*Unwinding Self*" is particularly incisive, as the poet grapples with issues of inequality, injustice, and the human condition. In "Wearing the Scarlet Letter 'A'," the poet assumes the persona of a woman condemned and ostracized by society, drawing parallels with the experiences of historical figures like Hester Prynne and Cordelia. This powerful poem serves as a denunciation of the ways in which society can marginalize and stigmatize individuals, particularly those who challenge societal norms.

The poem's title, "Wearing the Scarlet Letter 'A,'" is a direct reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel "The Scarlet Letter," in which the protagonist, Hester Prynne, is forced to wear a scarlet letter "A" as a mark of her supposed adultery. By invoking this powerful symbol of social condemnation, Sharma extends the metaphor to encompass the broader experiences of marginalized individuals throughout history.

The poem's opening lines, "I had been created a weaker creature / Flesh of your flesh, blood of your blood," immediately establish a sense of the speaker's vulnerability and the external forces that seek to oppress her. The reference to being "created a weaker creature" suggests a deep-seated patriarchal ideology that views women as inherently inferior, a notion that the speaker must confront and resist.

As the poem progresses, the speaker's defiance becomes increasingly palpable, as she declares, "I stood strong without any protest / Not to prove God wrong." This statement is a powerful assertion of the speaker's inner strength and resolve, even in the face of societal condemnation. The lines "Someone else also noted. / I waited and waited / His fingers to turn and twist" further underscore the speaker's determination to confront her accusers and challenge the structures of power that seek to control her. The poem's engagement with the themes of injustice, marginalization, and the resilience of the human spirit resonates powerfully with the reader, inviting them to reflect on the ongoing struggles of individuals and communities who have been forced to "wear the scarlet letter" of societal stigma and oppression.

In "The Kerala Flood 2018," Sharma reflects on the devastating natural disaster that ravaged the state of Kerala, India. The poem explores the complexities of relief efforts, the tensions between religious and political ideologies, and the human toll of such calamities.

Sharma's poetic voice is both empathetic and critical, challenging the reader to confront the systemic issues that contribute to the suffering of the victims.

The poem opens with a stark and immediately evocative image: "Idukki dam couldn't take it anymore / And the gates were opened. / The thirsty villagers could neither / Drink nor could they hold water." This vivid depiction of the flood's impact on the local population immediately draws the reader into the heart of the crisis, underscoring the dire consequences of the natural disaster.

As the poem progresses, Sharma delves into the broader socio-political context of the event, addressing the tensions between religious and political ideologies that often emerge in the wake of such tragedies. The lines "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" highlight the ways in which deep-seated cultural and religious divisions can further complicate the response to natural disasters.

Sharma's poetic voice is both empathetic and critical, as he acknowledges the suffering of the victims while also questioning the role of the divine and the efficacy of the relief efforts. The lines "God is great / God is all pardon / God is almighty / Why could He not choose both? / Why were people / Chosen to suffer?" express a profound sense of disappointment and disillusionment with the perceived absence or indifference of the divine in the face of such catastrophic events.

The poem's conclusion, with its references to the ongoing debates surrounding the acceptance of external aid and the role of the "argumentative Indian," further underscores the complexity of the situation and the challenges faced by those seeking to provide meaningful assistance. Sharma's poetic voice emerges as a powerful and empathetic commentary on the human experience of natural disasters, inviting the reader to confront the systemic issues that contribute to the suffering of the vulnerable.

Sharma's poetic prowess is particularly evident in his use of language and imagery. The collection is replete with vivid and evocative descriptions that transport the reader into the poet's world. In "Connaught Place," the reader is immersed in the bustling, vibrant atmosphere of the iconic New Delhi landmark, with its "Georgian architecture," "Heritage Festival," and the "tricolour" that "flutters here beckoning the locals." The poet's command of language and his ability to craft rich, sensory-laden imagery are hallmarks of his poetic craft.

The opening lines of the poem, "The Georgian architecture of CP / Reminds me of the imperial glory / But I don't wish it to be pulled down / Like the disputed structure in Varanasi," immediately establish a sense of place and historical context, while also hinting at the complex interplay of cultures and ideologies that permeates the space. Sharma's use of the abbreviation "CP" for Connaught Place further reinforces the poem's grounding in the lived experience of the urban landscape, inviting the reader to engage with the familiarity and vibrancy of the setting.

As the poem progresses, Sharma's imagery becomes increasingly vivid and sensory-rich, as he describes the "State Emporiums on one side and the / Shopkeepers lined up like curios on the / Queen's Way, rightfully the Janpath, / Breathe life into the stately buyers / And the popular budget shoppers." The juxtaposition of the "stately buyers" and the "popular budget shoppers" suggests a microcosm of the city's diversity, with its mixture of high-end and budget-conscious consumers.

Moreover, the collection displays a remarkable breadth of thematic exploration, ranging from the personal and introspective to the political and societal. Poems such as "Strutting Around" and "Sahibs, Snobs, Sinners" delve into the complexities of human relationships, power dynamics, and the challenges of navigating the modern world. In "Endless Wait," the poet explores the inner world of a bibliophile, grappling with the tension between the desire to read and the inability to do so, as a metaphor for the human experience.

In "Strutting Around," the poet contemplates the idea of one's own insignificance in the grand scheme of the world, drawing parallels between the poet's own existence and the casual indifference exhibited by the pigeons in the city square. The lines "Who do I hurt / If I leave this world? / What loss do I cause to the world / If I go missing?" express a profound sense of existential questioning, as the poet grapples with the notion of individual importance and the illusion of permanence.

Similarly, in "Sahibs, Snobs, Sinners," Sharma delves into the complexities of colonial and postcolonial identity, exploring the experiences of the "sahib," the "snob," and the "sinner" as they navigate the shifting social and cultural landscapes of India. The poem's vivid characterizations and its keen eye for detail, as exemplified in the lines "Hilda was nearby, / Smoking a hookah, / A new found love / In a dull, dusty, hot / Filthy, malaria-infested India," serve to illuminate the nuances of the human experience within the broader context of social and political change.

The poetic structure and form employed by Sharma are equally noteworthy. The collection features a diverse range of styles, from free verse to more structured forms, each of which serves to amplify the thematic content and emotional resonance of the poems. In "A Mock Drill," for instance, the rapid-fire, staccato-like structure reflects the urgency and chaos of the subject matter, while in "Stories from the Mahabharata," the concise, vignette-like approach allows the poet to capture the essence of the epic narrative.

The poem "A Mock Drill" is a prime example of Sharma's formal experimentation, with its terse, impactful lines and its urgent, almost breathless quality. The poem's structure, with its short, declarative statements, mirrors the frantic pace of a military exercise, creating a sense of immediacy and tension that heightens the poem's thematic exploration of violence, conflict, and the human cost of war.

In contrast, the series of poems titled "Stories from the Mahabharata" showcases Sharma's ability to distil the essence of a vast and complex narrative into a series of concise, evocative vignettes. Each numbered section of the poem presents a brief snapshot of a pivotal

moment from the great epic, allowing the reader to engage with the mythological narrative in a more fragmented and contemplative manner.

The use of these diverse poetic structures and forms not only serves to enhance the overall aesthetic and emotional impact of the collection but also reflects Sharma's deep engagement with the literary traditions and cultural heritage of India. By incorporating elements of free verse, structured poetry, and mythological storytelling, the poet creates a multifaceted and richly textured body of work that invites the reader to explore the depths of human experience from a variety of perspectives.

Throughout the collection, Sharma demonstrates a remarkable ability to synthesize diverse cultural and literary references, seamlessly weaving together elements from Indian mythology, world literature, and contemporary social issues. This rich intertextuality not only adds depth to the poems but also invites the reader to engage in a multi-layered interpretative process, drawing connections and discovering new layers of meaning.

In the poem "Buy Books, Not Diamonds," for instance, Sharma draws upon the social and environmental issues surrounding the diamond trade, invoking the troubled history of Sierra Leone and the role of multinational corporations in exploiting natural resources. By juxtaposing this contemporary concern with the enduring allure of diamond jewellery, the poet challenges the reader to reconsider the values and priorities that govern modern society.

Similarly, in "Lost Childhood," Sharma weaves together references to the works of Charles Dickens and R.K. Narayan, creating a mosaic of literary and cultural influences that enriches the poem's exploration of the loss of innocence and the exploitation of children. The poem's evocative imagery, such as the "girl child [being] strangulated / To save her honour; / A bead of acid is splashed into / Her eye to correct / The vision of the other," serves as a powerful indictment of the systemic oppression and violence that many children face, both in literature and in the real world.

In conclusion, Susheel Kumar Sharma's poetry collection *Unwinding Self* is a powerful and thought-provoking work that delves into the complexities of the human experience. Through his poetic explorations of identity, spirituality, social justice, and the human condition, Sharma crafts a tapestry of insights that challenge the reader to reflect on their own place in the world. The collection's literary merits, including its vivid imagery, diverse thematic range, and skillful use of poetic form, cement Sharma's position as a significant voice in contemporary Indian poetry. Sharma's poems invite the reader to engage with the rich cultural and literary traditions of India, while also confronting the pressing social and political issues of the modern era. The collection's thematic breadth and formal experimentation demonstrate the poet's versatility and his commitment to exploring the full spectrum of the human experience. Ultimately, Sharma's *Unwinding Self* is a powerful and thought-provoking collection that resonates with readers on multiple levels; it is surely a significant contribution to the contemporary Indian canon, bridging the personal and the universal. Sharma's poetic voice is both deeply personal and profoundly universal, inviting

the reader to embark on a journey of self-discovery, spiritual contemplation, and social engagement. Through the nuanced interplay of language, imagery, and cultural reference, the poet crafts a work that is both aesthetically compelling and intellectually stimulating, cementing his place as a significant voice in the contemporary landscape of Indian poetry.

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