

***Unwinding Self*: A Cathartic Touch in an Uneven World of Difference**

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Susheel Kumar Sharma's poetry collection *Unwinding Self* as a therapeutic intervention in a fractured world marked by cultural, racial, and existential divides. Sharma's work navigates the existential dilemmas of postcolonial subjects, exploring themes of identity fragmentation, ecological crisis, and spiritual alienation through the lens of both Indian spiritual traditions and Western thought. Drawing parallels with T.S. Eliot and engaging phenomenological and postcolonial frameworks, the analysis highlights the poet's attempt to "unwind" the self from societal constraints and cathartically articulate the marginalization of Black, Brown, and indigenous communities. The collection reveals a tension between seeking solace in religion and myth, yet recognizing their inadequacy in addressing modern crises. Sharma's poetic voice emerges as a healing force, giving voice to the silenced and fostering hope in a world overwhelmed by difference and injustice, urging readers to engage with the "other" with fresh, empathetic eyes.

Keywords: Postcolonial Poetry, Cathartic Expression, Identity Fragmentation, Ecological Crisis, Marginalization, Phenomenology

Susheel Kumar Sharma's *Unwinding Self* depicts the artistic gift and in-depth insight of the poet. As the title *Unwinding Self*, more than suggests, the writing of this collection of poetry appears to be a very critical exercise in the purification one's soul – of the poet and that of the reader. The poet's lines from "The Destitute" are reflective of the suffocating conditions that permeate humanity and this world, whether the East or the West. This cathartic need and urge to regenerate perhaps finds itself manifested in the poetic religious overtones of the poet as he states: "The air seems to choke/ Me to death./ I've to kill myself for regeneration" (12).

Susheel Sharma's artistic expressions and keen observation of the immediate world around him deserves due recognition as he unveils his profound knowledge and link to vernacular Indian roots and culture. This regionalized sense of immediacy and its profundity can be felt in the connection that the poet depicts in his religious Indian roots – as culture and one's spirituality cannot be effectively isolated from one another. In this work, the Hindu spiritual traditions and its sanctity are closely associated with the holy river of Ganges and the symbolisms that it evokes through poems like "Chasing a Dream on the Ganges", "Stories from Mahabharata", "Snapshots", "Durga Puja", "Bubli Poems" and "A Family by the Road", cannot be overlooked. Moreover, he is no stranger to the traditions of the West, as a Professor of English at the University of Allahabad, the familiarity is undeniably established. The conjoining of two major world views through his works, one overlapping the other with both in-depth and subtle references, is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot who not only acquired knowledge of Indian epistemic traditions but had religiously learned to read them in the original Sanskrit texts. There are abundant examples of the poet's learned engagement with

the traditions of the Christianity, often, with direct references to the Christian order in such poems as “Me, A Black Doxy” where Ezekiel 16:5 from the Holy Bible is quoted.

“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 loathing of thy person,
in the day that thou wast born.” (14)

In “The World in Words in 2015” Susheel Kumar Sharma paints a stark picture of the contemporary world which stands in opposition to the ideals of the message embedded in Christ’s sermon on the mount. The travesty of the world is that it is constantly at odds with the different other and how this continues to fuel the antagonism of twenty-first century global order. However, though the poet endeavours to unravel the existential questions of modern-day living, through the epistemological and spiritual wisdom of the East and the West, it consistently falls short of excavating a meaningful answer. “Snapshots” provides the reader with a glimpse of how religion no longer seems to provide solutions to the problems of the earth – undergoing disasters with untold damages: “Tsunami hits Japan/ God is resting in Heaven.” (1)

The gods continue to seem to be distanced from the untold miseries of the world as the poet articulates in the concluding lines of “Snapshots”

I am Uma.
I am Vishnu.
I am Varanasi.
Where is Bhagiratha? (3)

“Snapshots” also highlights with precision, the nature of man-made ecological imbalances brought about by man himself. A chaotic world forced to come to terms with its predatoriness to acquire more and more; motivated by an utter disregard for earth’s natural capacity to provide the yield.

Greenhouse reduction;
Human displacements,
Withered livelihood;
Civilization marches ahead. (2-3)

In the name of economic growth and progress, the contemporary capitalist society hungers for more of everything despite the heavy price humanity is compelled to pay up for the casualties – pollution, erratic weather conditions, epidemics and pandemics – the list is unending. Although man has acquired a plethora of knowledge, which foreshadows what is to become of world that continues to wreak havoc on itself; man’s self-centeredness knows no bounds.

On reading Sharma’s *Unwinding Self* one gets the sense of a world that has lost its natural order and rhythm and is groping to find therapeutic healing through a process of unwinding the self. One becomes aware of the need for purification and purgation of negative

thoughts and emotions that mankind has been fed by the ills of the world. Humanity is lost in the sea of modernity and the quest for knowledge ironically has brought about a situation that humanity is engulfed in violence – brought about by many levels of differences and otherizations. The absurdities of life become even more accentuated in the often unacknowledged yet conscious perpetuation of acts of injustice on the other – social, economic and political. The concluding lines from the poem “The End of the Road” highlight how sharp the divisions between one and the other has become. The world as one has been familiar with, constantly transforms, and has now made mankind blind. The inability to see another’s plight – the other’s reality: “The world has lost its original colour./ One’s reality becomes another man’s burden/ If one loses one’s eyesight.” (4)

Susheel Kumar Sharma’s healing touch provides an insight into the battered life of a student from the margins of society in “On Reading Langston Hughes”. Through this poem he aptly paints a picture of the unjust nature of this cruel world and establishes that he is not blind to the hurt, pain and adversities of the margins. However, the initial part of the poem depicts conditions that take for granted the background of the student. The poet teacher treats him like any other student from his class not realizing how bereft of a ‘normal’ life he was. Edmund Husserl the Czech-German philosopher’s extensive study on the field of phenomenology questions the very tendency of man to take things for granted. Dan Zahavi in discussing Husserl’s inputs highlights the need for looking at existing objects and conditions with fresh eyes.

We, begin, then, by questioning what we had previously taken for granted, or by wondering at what seems most familiar. This involves a change of attitude; we must look at the world with “new eyes”. (238-39)

On the student unveiling the challenges he was made to confront from the disadvantaged position of his social background the poet teacher is enlightened about the plight of society’s peripheries. How the poor student travels to school from a distance of 20 kms every day; how he struggles to put together the fees while toiling day and night to pay for his mother’s medical bills; and how he is the only one dreaming to complete higher studies from his community. The poet-teacher’s recognition of the dreams of the poor student through this work can be lauded as effort to inject the therapeutic touch to the precarious nature of life in the margins of society. Susheel Sharma continues to explore the theme of the margins by exploring the space of the racial lived experience of the blacks in the West. The discrimination of blacks by the white represents the relationship of being subordinated and dehumanized. Paulo Freire in his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2017) draws one’s attention to the fact that dehumanization is the “...result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors” (18). In the poem “The Black Experience” the treatment of the blacks makes the poet question: “Was any communication possible/ Except about our wounds/ And agonies?” (13)

And in these grave moments of oppression, the poet continues to act on behalf of the discriminated blacks exploring ways to articulate the gross acts of injustice and violence forcefully inflicted on them.

Where was the god of justice,
When he slyly

Pushed my son away
 Into a different cabin? (13)

The poet's voicing of the plight of the racially coloured margins of the blacks makes provisions for that cathartic release that is so needed in the contemporary world where the divisions seem to grow wider by the day. In the poem, "Me, A Black Doxy", Susheel Kumar Sharma further extends the discrimination of the blacks specifically within the space of black women. This uneven world and the frailties of human existence compel the societal margins to a reality that embodies a truth one constantly and consciously denies. Sharma bravely delves into the life of a black prostitute providing voice to a reality that high-brow society discards as a tabooed space of existence. Drawing from Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception* (2003) "bare anonymous life" (60) the black prostitute's women's life does not deserve any attention from respectable societal norms. In fact, there are three levels of dismissals. First, she is black. Second, she is a woman. Third, she is in a trade absolutely detestable to the society at large. Sharma seems to be disturbed by the inequities of existence and the dehumanization of humanity and strives to find that space where the margins can find a voice, even if it is barely audible. But ironically, the poet seems to regain significant trust in God here. A God who had failed to provide rest and sustenance in his other poems from this collection.

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. (15)

Susheel Kumar Sharma also explores how a brown Indian's difference in identity leads to otherization and alienation in the poem "The Destitute." He highlights how efforts are made to conceal and perhaps blend into the other's way of life; distinct from one's native culture. The dominant other's norms are impressed upon the indigenous values subordinated by unfamiliar and strange ways leading to a sense of disorientation and disconnect of the self from one's ideals: "The mind is washed away/ From beneath my feet." (12)

The world is unkind and cruel; humanity refuses to accept alternative perspectives that define a life and existence characterized by difference

To hide my brown colour
 I dress in white apron
 Colour my hair silver
 Use a borrowed tongue
 Spend my holidays in the States
 The mind is washed away
 From beneath my feet.
 I lose my motherland to an alien (12)

Also in section iii, *The Cracked World* of the poem "Thus Spake a Woman," Sharma draws one's attention to the differences between the poet's country from that of the West. The

comparative differences are utilized to highlight the discriminatory nature of one society's standards from another – one that is used to divide, otherize and antagonize the self from the other.

Nor could I gift a bead crochet to my beloved
As in my country there are no coral reefs.
Choral-bells do not tinkle here
Nor are any cakes exchanged with friends (17)

Susheel Kumar Sharma through his poems attempts to heal a world that is divided on innumerable lines of differences and distinctions. He endeavours to bring forth through comparison differences in ideals, norms, values and principles often the cause of animosity between many diverse communities of the world. The common fault that one assigns to the other is based on the failure of the other to conform to the self's diktats of what defines what is acceptable or not. Humanity's lack of tolerance for the other's indigenous or vernacular forms of alternative thoughts and expression continues to feed the fire of otherization and discrimination.

As keen scholars of English literature from Indian state of Mizoram in North-east India, we observe, one's own lived-experience is defined by one of difference from the norms of the standard Indian canon. The idea of India is more often than not defined by attributes that excludes the indigeneity of one's existence as a Mizo. The characteristic vernacular Mizo trait that identifies with the rugged mountainous and hilly geographical region of the North-east India fails to conform to the Aryan Sanskritized notion of Indianness. The genealogical origins of Mizo ancestors bear stronger and deeper ties with Southeast Asian countries rather than the predominantly Aryan Indian subcontinent on the West. As such, defining the North-east and Mizo face as a mirror of the Mongoloid physical traits racially distinguishable from the majority of the Indian race. The Mizo language too has no ties with the languages mothered by the Sanskrit tradition, in fact, it is categorized as a Tibeto-Burman language which is tonal and distinct in nature from other dominant Indian languages. Often the life of a Mizo is treated as a "bare anonymous life", unfamiliar and different, a life that deviates from the idea of India and therefore justified in the abnormalization and otherization of the community's distinct traits. Sharma's own literary engagements with the discrimination and segregation of marginalized communities of the Blacks and the Browns in relation to the West finds echoes in the lives of the indigenous tribal communities of North-east India. In the poem, "Thus Spake the Woman", section III *The Cracked World*, the poet articulates the position of marginality in the following lines: "My mother also prayed for my welfare./ Our fault was simple/ We had a different God to worship." (18)

This provides a clear example of how the fault of one community can be assigned to just being different from the other. A difference in culture, language, religion and temperament can often be the ground for excluding and otherizing communities leading to conflicts and confrontations, at times, characterized by violence. Sharma's collection of poetry, *Unwinding Self*, compels the reader to reassess one's position in relation to fixed minds and perspectives which fail to accommodate alternative forms of thoughts and lived experiences. Dominick La Capra in his article "Experience and Identity" (2006) stresses on how identity should not be, "... conflated with identification in the sense of total fusion with

others wherein difference is obliterated..." (228) The collection of poems in *Unwinding Self* touches the soul of the marginalized different, whether Black, Brown or Mizo. He lends an articulate voice to the silenced sections of the world's populations providing a cathartic release to those who have been discriminated and otherized for just being different. A literary knight in shining armour whose chivalry in speaking up for the cause of the marginalized, where ever they are, establishes reassurance in a global order that often fails to look beyond the self. The presence of such literary voices provides a scaffold to the otherized, abnormalized and marginalized inspiring hope in a desperate world overwhelmed by discrimination cruelly founded upon differences. Sharma's articulation of the dehumanization and oppression of the marginalized different provides a beacon of hope by enabling the otherized to break their silence and aspire for a better tomorrow. In section II *Fracas* of the poem "Thus Spake a Woman", the poet creates conditions where society's peripheries are given the platform to express one's suppressed desires.

My dream will not die
 Snowed and buried
 In the heap of broken images.
 I shall not miss the chance
 To fly to the moon. (17)

A world that is capable of looking at the other with what Husserl had highlighted as "new eyes" and accommodate the distinct and disparate elements of the other's identity and vernacular existence. The right to aspire and keenly look forward into a future that does not unjustly suppress or subordinate is what Susheel Kumar Sharma has achieved by providing that cathartic touch to an uneven world of the different.

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