

Book Review

Unwinding Self

A Collection of Poems by Susheel Kumar Sharma

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In a letter to John Taylor in 1818 John Keats wrote, "... if Poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all." This obviously speaks of an axiom for Romantic poetry. But I believe, the Keatsian axiom holds good for poetry across the ages. While reading the poems in *Unwinding Self*, authored by Susheel Kumar Sharma, I feel that the statement of Keats is relevant to us still. The poems included in the anthology often seem to come 'naturally' from the core of the poet's heart and they are marked by a fine lyrical spontaneity.

The *Unwinding Self* contains forty-two poems, and as the title suggests, most of them are explorations of the self. The 'I' is often at the centre of the discourse. Thus, in "The End of the Road" we listen to the anguished voice of a myopic man who has to 'choose' one of the 'six pairs of spectacles' to 'suit to the occasion' or the voice of an 'unlucky' man in "The Unlucky" who needs to visit a text time and again to 'know its meaning'. Sometimes the nonchalant outlook of the poet amazes the readers, as in "The New Year Dawn": "In the New Year,/ I promise,/ I take on life and also death/With equal strides". However, it's not always the voice of the poet's own self that speaks to us because the poet assumes the persona of other selves too in his writings. "The Cracked World" in *Thus Spake a Woman* is a poignant case in point where the poet assumes the identity of 'an outcast in the cellular jail' who seems to be a victim of the 'politics of colour' and denied 'the firmament of freedom'.

A couple of poems in the *Unwinding Self* powerfully address the issue of the 'politics of colour'. "The Black Experience" may at once come to our mind in which the speaker vehemently protests against the racial discrimination based on colour when the Whites consider the Blacks merely as a 'patch' in 'the whites' territory'. The speaker in the poem raises a question that will surely agitate the readers: "Where was the god of justice./ When he slyly /Pushed my son away/ Into a different cabin?". This 'different cabin' obviously alludes to the ghettoization which is an integral part of Black experience. The poem makes us think that Black lives indeed matter and the Blacks have every right to demand justice against the White supremacy.

The poems in the anthology under review sometimes give a different reading to Black American poetry and bring home the issue of marginal identity in an Indian perspective. In "On Reading Langston Hughes's 'Theme for English B'" the 'colored student' becomes the Dalit student to the Indian imagination as both of them are recognized as the 'other' by the dominant culture in their respective societies. We cannot afford to forget that the Dalit Panthers of 1970s was inspired by the U.S.A. Black Movement. The University teacher in the poem, who represents the mainstream culture, is identified with Dronacharya by the 'poor boy'. The boy asks the teacher: "Will you be another/Stumbling block on my way?/ I am told, you justify Dronacharya's every act - /



Will you repeat him? Will you replicate him?” He does not wait for the teacher’s answer, rather at once raises his voice: “In your victory will lie your defeat;/ My statues will be raised – not yours./ Justice will be done; I have patience for it.” Baburao Bagul, a noted Marathi Dalit author writes, “‘Dalit’ is the name for total revolution; it is revolution incarnate.” In the fiery assertion of the boy, we get a feel of the ‘revolution’ – revolution against the age-old casteist hegemony. One may at this point be reminded of the concluding lines in Sharankumar Limbale’s “White Paper”: “I want my rights, give me my rights./... My rights are rising like the sun./ Will you deny this sunrise?”

The strength of the poems in *Unwinding Self* often lies in its expression of controlled anger. The tone is sarcastic and the mode is allusive. In the opening section of Part III of “The World in Words in 2015” we get Biblical echoes but the purpose is to deride moral degeneration and hypocrisy: “What is physical violation?/ Blessed are those that are pure in heart,/ God sees hearts and not bodies”. This kind of ironic temper is characteristic of Nissim Ezekiel’s poems included in *Latter Day Psalms* where the poet exploits the psalms in the Bible for the purposes of mockery. But the poet of *Unwinding Self* is more virulent in his attack: “Remain meek if you/ Wish to inherit the world./ Intolerant people/ Make intolerant nations/ Those need to be bombarded/To create new territories.”

Sarcasm is also prominent in “Lost Childhood”. The poem begins with a poignant utterance: “The childhood lost in Dickens/ Is found in Anand”. At once the readers may link the story of destitution and misery in a novel like *Oliver Twist* with that in *Coolie*. Oliver and Munoo remain immortal figures to us. Sarcasm reaches its peak in the lines that read: “The one who is disowned by a father/ Has a heavenly father;/ The one who is abandoned/ By a mother on the footpath/Needs a Daniel of Judgement.” The lines pierce the reader’s heart like a bullet. The satire in the next couple of lines is terrific: “The girl child is strangulated/ To save her honour;/ A bead of acid is splashed into/ Her eye to correct/ The vision of the other.” This is how the poet brings forward the issue of gendered violence which unfortunately has become almost a daily occurrence in the present scenario. But the victim must not cry because it may ‘disturb’ and irritate the ‘Sleeping Father’. The poem becomes sharply didactic towards the end: “We do not need flutes to play/ We need drums to beat around”.

Didacticism also creates its ‘palpable design’ in “The Kerala Flood 2018”. The poem begins with a terrible description of flood, then delicately alludes to Gandhi’s controversial comments on the Bihar earthquake and then moves on to the debate on beef-eating. The movement from one issue to another in the poem is not smooth. However, towards the close the text again picks up the theme of flood and raises a couple of questions in connection with the indescribable sufferings of the people in the state: “Why did they have to suffer/In God’s own land?/ Has God vanished abandoning his abode?” etc. and arrives at a legitimate conclusion: “Someday He has to return to establish order./ The proxies are no good.” The statement, it goes without saying, is couched in superb irony and the ironic tone continues till the end.

Irony and sarcasm are indeed the forte of the poet. In the first poem of the anthology “Snapshots” it is pin pointedly evident: “Tsunami hits Japan./ God is resting in Heaven.” The statement is precise but it reveals how the poet castigates God when He has a callous disregard for human concerns in the time of environmental crisis. Anthropocenic awareness is very subtly present in “A Pond Nearby”: “The butterflies are flying endlessly



for flowers/ The blades of grass do not sprout anymore./ The tufts of grass are no more the hiding places/For the chameleons./ The nest on the mango tree has turned black/The birds' cry of hunger is no more heard." This speaks of an ominous silence before the storm. A chill runs down our spine that we are heading towards a catastrophe. In *Can Poetry Save the Earth: A Field Guide to Nature Poems* (2009) John Felstiner passionately argues that poetry has an important role to play in today's world suffering from environmental disorder. According to Felstiner, "Science, policy, and activism point the way toward solutions but something deeper must draw us there." In Felstiner's words, "It can be found in poetry's musical lift, attentive imagery, and shaping force." The images used in the poem have indeed a 'shaping force' that compels us to recognize the gravity of the truth; we become aware that we have to save our planet at any cost; we have *to live radical compassion, not just speak of it*, to borrow a line from Seth Garcia's poem "Displaced Water".

The beauty of the representative poems of *Unwinding Self* often lies in their imagery. The poet knows well how to evoke mental pictures while a reader goes through a certain poetical piece. In "A Voice", just with the movement of the cursor, the fingers move, "From the beloved's curvy back/ To her creamy thighs/ On the screen/ Flashes a small bed/On which two lovers are caressing each other". The arresting imagery of the lines will immediately engage the readers, and a passionate scene seems to float in front of them. The poem "Crowded Locals" may also come to one's mind in this context. The poet here deftly draws a vivid and lively picture of a space inside a city-bound local train during busy hours: "I cannot solve crossword puzzles/ While riding a Mumbai Local./ Somebody is snatching my paper /Unerringly I collect it and fold it./ The newspaper headline carries/ No meaning here". The lines carry a tremendous sense of immediacy. At once a reader is carried away by his/her imagination and becomes the fellow passenger of the poet in the train compartment. But this is not always the case. In "Connaught Place", for example, the images don't fall into an organic pattern, and hence the description of the business centre at the heart of the capital city verges on the prosaic.

But prose turns to poetry once the imagination takes its own route whether it is allegorical or symbolic. In "Kabir's Chadar" allegory is used as an artistic device. The opening stanza of the poem gives the direction to its central theme: "Unlike Kabir's chadar/ Mine was thickly woven./ Kabir's was white but mine/Patterned with various beautiful designs/ In dark but shining colours." The white chadar of Kabir obviously speaks of the moral integrity of the man (the name 'Kabir' will instantly remind the Indian readers of a saint's life) whereas the poetic persona's 'thickly woven' chadar along with its dark 'beautiful designs' is suggestive of his moral lapses. So, a piece of cloth marvelously serves the allegorical purpose of the poem. We may here recall a section of Langland's *Piers the Plowman* where Conscience tells Hawkyn: "Your best coat is very marked and stained – it needs washing". The uniqueness of "Kabir's Chadar", however, lies in its brilliant twist to the allegorical mode as the poem ends with a question: "How could Kabir/ Afford to return his chadar/ As he had obtained it?/ Does the clue lie in/Thinness or whiteness?".

The poems in *Unwinding Self* are at times rich in symbols. "A Gush of Wind" is a fine example. The poet tries to resist the wind by 'closing the windows' and 'shutting the door' but he fails. It enters into his private space without asking for his permission. The poet asks himself: "Where does the old air go so stealthily?/ Is it so difficult to live with a



new odour?”. He looks for an answer in the literary authorities like Whitman, Pushkin and Ginsberg. But being dissatisfied he turns to the path of Rajneesh, an Indian godman and mystic, and tries to awaken the snake that in all probability represents the ‘Kulakundalini’. The concluding lines of the poem are profoundly suggestive: “Let the wind gush into my room./ I am not afraid of it.” The question obviously rises: What does the ‘wind’ stand for? In symbolic terms, the gush of wind may be the libidinal impulse that the poet wants to repress but it ‘stealthily’ enters into his consciousness and unsettles his being till he accepts it with a calm resignation.

Unwinding Self contains gems and in its own way enriches the casket of Indian English poetry. The diction of the poems has often a rocky bareness that carries its immediate appeal to the readers. We may quote here a few lines like “Our fault was simple/We had a different God to worship” (“The Cracked World”), “What is the point in bundling the dreams/And packing them safely till the doomsday?” (“Like Father, Unlike Son”) etc. But the poems have rich layers of meanings and embody various literary/cultural references that may sometimes sound alien to the non-Indian readers. “Chasing a Dream on the Ganges” and “Ram Setu” among others offer good examples. The poet, therefore, has furnished an exhaustive glossary so that the readers cutting across cultures don’t stumble over the allusions. The ‘Afterwords’ have added a significant dimension to the volume. In fine, *Unwinding Self* is a joy to read and a pleasant companion to the lovers of poetry.

Joyjit Ghosh

