

Book Review

*Voices at the Door: Critical Responses to Susheel Kumar
Sharma's The Door Is Half Open*

Edited by Pradip Kumar Patra

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T. S. Eliot in “The Perfect Critic” has said that criticism is not the satisfaction of suppressed creative wish. It should be an “organized form of intellectual activity” and not be ‘impressionistic’. *Voices at the Door: Critical Responses to Susheel Kumar Sharma's The Door is Half Open* (2022) by Pradip Kumar Patra stands the test with its “piercing insights” (Awadesh Kumar) into the collection of poems. Indeed, the book is an ‘organized’ form of intellectual activity because with its fifty seven chosen essays and an interview, it encourages plurality of viewpoints while engaging with the second book of poems by the poet, *The Door is Half Open* (2020), an “amazingly intricate and intimate” (Neerja Arun) collection of poems born during a ‘terrible time’. The attempt to focus on multiple viewpoints highlighting a variety of perspectives is a proposition better than that of a single critic commenting on a great many things because two heads are always better than one. The essays look at its ‘object’ ‘disinterestedly’ so as to help the readers form correct judgements for themselves by ‘elucidating’ the phenomenal work. It is a true critical endeavour which, instead of ‘legislating’ and ‘advocating’, probes. Indeed, the book combines sensitiveness, erudition, sense of fact, sense of history and a great generalizing power.

What if the critical volume was not there? What if the uninitiated readers are pleased to be transported by *The Door is Half Open*, and not care to reflect upon why it pleases? The ‘overwhelmingly beautiful’ poems have the brilliance to create in the readers an ‘impression’ of stunning beauty. This ‘impression’ may be emotionally too deep to allow any attempts at engaging with the initial impression, and may fail to distinguish ‘enjoyment’ from ‘criticism’. Thus, the readers may indulge in their own emotions aroused by the reading. This is likely to reduce the poet to an ‘accidental stimulus’ that unduly inflates the emotions in the readers. The readers may be misled from the ‘object’ of contemplation to their ‘self’. The critical compendium inspires ‘contemplation’ on the poetic creation. It helps us rule out ‘accidents’ of personal emotion, and formulate principles regarding ‘why’

it pleases us. The brilliance of the volume lies in the fact that it helps readers look at its object of contemplation ‘as it is’ without having any ‘palpable design’, and without having any other motif than to elucidate the book. It is a genuinely ‘disinterested’ critical enterprise that never loses sight of its ‘object’ while surveying. In fine, the volume is more ‘criticism’ than ‘appreciation’ and is founded on the perceptions of some critically fortified minds.

The title and the subtitle complement each other. The title reveals that the ‘critic’ has started his journey to ‘consciousness’ from the point where the ‘poet’ had left. Having already formed the “core within” (*From the Core Within* is Sharma’s first volume), the poet kept the ‘door half-open’ so that ‘the community of readers’ thronging the threshold can “peep into” (Jasvinder Singh) and unravel the “poetic world” (Sudhir Arora). It is the readers’ responses that may lend meaning to the ‘voices’ (“myriads of experiences,” according to Ritika Singh) at the core. According to Awadesh Sinha, “The poet wishes the half-open door to be opened by his readers.” Thus, the title, ‘metaphorical’ (“doors of perception” according to Maxim Demchenko) as it is, is well complemented by the subtitle that is ‘literal’. The brilliance of the Preface and the Introduction to the volume is that they have been successful in performing the worthy task of ‘organizing’ the diversified perceptions on the “intense and pure” (Patra) poems on a single piece of thread. The plurality of responses has been ‘structured’ by a perceptive mind that serves as a prism to gather the diffused resonances. It is in his capacity to unify the variegated responses that the editor is a ‘creator’ who, in his attempts to elucidate, radiates the light of creation that ‘enlightens’ but never ‘dazzles’. The very opening sentence of the Introduction – “Knowing Susheel Kumar Sharma through his poems is more enlightening than knowing him in reality” – indicates that the book’s approach is ‘objective’. What can be a better pursuit than to ‘know’ the poet from the poems? The editor’s transparency is evident in his honest revelation that most of the pieces in the collection were published elsewhere. Naturally, the editor’s expertise remains enshrined not in ‘editing’ but in ‘organizing’ the essays in the best possible way. When the editor says in the Introduction that reading the poems is a journey that most often leads to ‘nothing’, what he means is the need to focus on the ‘journey itself’ which is its own reward, and which naturally leads to ‘realization’ without irritable attempts to arrive at the ‘destination’. The epigraph to the Introduction – “Poetry as a Means of Cleansing Consciousness” – serves as a kind of axis around which all the bemused reflections on the “honest assessment of life” (De Vos) rotate.

Just as the themes in *The Door is Half Open* are an “eclectic mix” (Abha Iyenger) of “roller-coaster experience” (Radhika Menon), the critical essays too are varied in perspectives. The essays like “Falling Brick by Brick” (Abha Iyenger), “Quintessentially Indian” (Jai Shankar Jha), “Socio-cultural Ethos of India” (Prakash Chandra Pradhan), “Thought Provoking Indian Sensibility” (Rabindra Kumar Verma), “Postmodern Poetry” (Rashmi Jain), “Appraising Indianness via the Foreign” (Suresh Chandra) offer a peep into the Postcolonial

and Postmodern Indian vibes of life. To Gagana Purohit, the poet, unlike many leading Indian English poets, is free from “the colonial hangover.” The essays by Ann Rogers, Awadhesh Kumar Sinha, Madhumita Ghosh, Mithilesh Kumar Pandey & Shankhadeep Chattopadhyay, P C K Prem, Pragya Mishra, Shubha Dwivedi, Suresh Chandra Dwivedi are reflections on a modern man’s ruminations during his spiritual quest across the social space. According to Asoke Kumar Sinha, the poems are “attractions and revulsions” of the man who has to thread through the present times, and offer “the fever chart of the modern human situation.” The poems characterized by emotional outpourings on universal themes as well as on the theme of religion and suffering have been the focal point of the essays by Georgia Eva Xanthopoulos, Leela Kanal, Reena Sanasan, M R Joshi, Mary Mohanty, Suresh Chandra Dubey, T S Chandra Mouli, G L Gautamand Shanti Rajaraman. The poet’s humanism and posthumanism including environmental concerns have won accolades from critics like K Rajamouly, Mohan Patnaik, Jordan Clary and Kamala K. The ‘performative’ aspects of the poet’s imagination have arrested the attention of Jyotsna Prabhakar while the poet’s sense of wit and mastery of language have been both praised and critiqued by Gavriel Navarro, K K Mishra, Kenneth Lumpkin, Krishna Gopal Srivastava, Kulwant Singh Gill, N. N. Monachari, Nikunj Kishor Das, Pradip Kumar Patra, Pritam Bhattacharyya, Patricia Prime and Stuti Khare. Gurrapu Damodar finds in the “well chiselled” poems “deep love of flora and fauna.”

The reviews in the volume can be clustered around some ancillary themes too. The reviews by Abha Iyengar, Barbara Wuhr, K Rajamouly, Kamala K, Leela Kanal, Mary Mohanty, Sandeep Kumar Gupta among others focus on the ‘poet’s self’. The articles by Ann Rogers, K. Balachandran, Kenneth Lumpkin, Krishna Gopal Srivastava, M. R. Joshi et al engage with ‘themes’, some of which are specific to India’s cultural matrix, and some are universal in import. Ann Rogers praises the poet for taking the readers on a delightful journey across the space of his ‘home land’. Carol Abraham says that the door, if opened, “leads to life.” While some reviewers are intrigued by the ‘surprises’ inspired by the light emanating from the ‘half-open door’, Awadhesh Sinha and Nikunj Kishore Das love the “scintillating wit” and the “scintillating poetic fount” that sparks but does not shock (“an uncritical critique,” according to N. S. Sahu). Some of the reviewers praise the volume for its spontaneity, humanity, intensity, recollections, reflections, tranquillity, “plurality of voice” (Ahmad Raja) and for its handling of myths. Indeed, *Voices at the Door* has been successful in foregrounding the poet’s abiding concerns for “revisiting the environment” (Shamenaz Bano) which is on the brink of disaster, while some other essays fail not to take note of the ecological aspects of the poems. The book has justifiably assessed *The Door is Half Open* as an ‘important addition’ to Indian English poetry.

If putting the minuscule experiences of life in the Anthropocene under the surreal, magnifying glass of poetry be a worthy pursuit; if spilling over to the poet’s personality after fulfilling the requirements of autonomy of a text be the hallmark

of good poetry; if commitment, insight, dedication, passion and craftsmanship be the markers of excellent poetry; if bridging the inward and the outward selves of the poet be worthwhile - then editor Pradip Kumar Patra has rendered a commendable service to the shrinking world of critical perspectives on Indian English poetry by anthologizing the essays.