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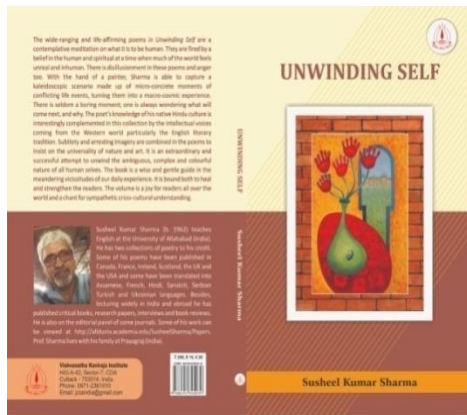
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Review

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



Susheel Kumar Sharma's *Unwinding Self* has neatly been divided into three parts: poetry, glossary, and afterword. The acknowledgments in the book show that some of the poems have also been published earlier elsewhere. It is a collection of important poems, which are readable and enjoyable. One may use Frostian expressions like “the poems are born in a love sickness” and “a poem begins in delight and ends in wisdom” to describe them. Innovation in the use of

language is the art of defamiliarization in the book.

The meaning of the poems in the book comes out, along with layers of emotions laced with satire and irony. The poet is a lover of literature in several languages as he is a progressive pundit, and his book is the product of a wordsmith. Therefore, there is a need to understand his poetic art from the very beginning with the meaning of the titles used in the collection which indicate that the book has been planned well. Apparently, the poet wants to celebrate self. Man is free, but he is chained; this is the unfortunate situation in which the poet finds himself. However, the titles also hint that the poet is bound to undo the chains of his life. He wants to undo the problems of the world that have unwrapped him. The bag of problems is gradually unwound, and the book of poems falls off. The world is too much for the poet and this is a fallen, crooked world, a materialistic, capitalistic, and corrupt world.

It has been proclaimed that in the boundless world of poetry, Prajapati (Brahma) is the only poet. He changes the universe as and when he thinks best (“अपारे काव्यसंसारे कविरैकः प्रजापतिः। यथास्मै रोचते विश्वं तथा वै परिवर्तते॥”). However, in the mortal world, philosophy, post, ambition, and scholarship are not enough for writing poetry; without suffering, pain, sorrow, and wounds, true poetry never comes. Many a poet has sought to express this idea. For example, Akbar Ilahabadi writes: “dard ko dil mein de jagah ‘Akbar’/ Ilm se shayari nahi aati”. The famous Hindi poet, Sumitra Nandan Pant, asserts that all good poetry takes birth in

the sorrowful moments (“*viyogi hoga pahla kavi, ah se upja hoga gaan, nikal karaankhon se chupchap, bahi hogi kavita anjan*”, “Pallav”). Be it Valmiki’s first poetic utterance: “*mā niṣāda pratiṣṭhā tvamagamah śāsvatīḥ samāḥ yat krauñcamithunādekam avadhīḥ kāmamohitam*” or Nirala’s: “*dukh hi jivan ki katha rahi, kya kahun aaj, jo nahi kahi*” (Saroj Smriti), the lines have their origin in the personal sorrow of the poet. A good poet enlarges his vision based on his experience and universalises his sorrow to reach a shared expression as has been indicated by Mahadevi Verma: “*kan kan se aansu ke nirjhar, ho uthta jivan mridu urvar*” (Rashmi) and Jai Shankar Prasad: “*dukh ki pichhli rajani beech, vikasta such ka naval prabhat*” (*Kamayani*), to cite two examples from the important romantic poets in Hindi.

Unlike the romantic poets of English and Hindi, Susheel’s poems deal with others’ sorrow. They are very well chiselled to evoke the emotion of pity. For example, in “On Reading Langston Hughes’s ‘Theme for English B’”, he narrates the story of a downtrodden boy’s sorrow, evokes sympathies for him, and also evokes sympathies for himself as a teacher. The poem highlights how, in the name of social justice and mercy, merit and scholarship are not only being compromised but also dumped. Various conflicting strands of political positions are also mentioned in the poem, which is a wonderful potpourri of pity, irony, and satire. What is noteworthy in the collection is that many personas in Susheel’s poems are female; despite being a male, the poet is able to highlight the female predicament by having a “negative capability” to use a Keatsian expression. He is having a powerful “*madhumati bhumika*” to use an expression from Indian aesthetics. For example, there are two poems about the marginalised and coloured American females. While one narrates her experiences as a slave woman (“The Black Experience”), the other contemplates from various perspectives her status of being a prostitute to earn her livelihood. (“Me, A Black Doxy”) The angst and the helplessness of the African slave can be felt in the following lines:

Where was the god of justice,
When he slyly
Pushed my son away
Into a different cabin? (p. 13)

The poet makes fun of the American dream of having a “City upon a Hill” and is able to mock the religious charlatans in a very clever manner through the experience of this slave woman:

Yes, we could pray to
Jesus about our welfare;
And he prayed for more profit
To the same lord. (p.13)

The poem tends to become somewhat like a blues song that was used by such women to preserve their sorrowful history and pass on the same to the people of the next generation. The story continues in the next poem, “Me, A Black Doxy”, where issues like black money, black act, black law, black colour, black education and many other such labels are questioned to highlight the predicament of an Afro-American prostitute in a supposedly egalitarian, hard-working, brightly shining, democratic society being run on Christian principles:

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. (p. 15)

The rampant discrimination at all levels in the American society is the hallmark of this poem about a helpless woman.

The theme of women's suffering continues in the next poem, "Thus Spake a Woman", which has four sections under separate titles that indicate four stages of a woman's life i.e., that of blooming love, married life, late married life, and a grown-up mother. There is happiness only in imagination in the first stage: "I am looking for those days on the moon/ Which I was unable to clinch in my fist". ("A Dreamer") In the second stage, the female persona feels like a trapped bird in the marital meshwork, frantically but vainly trying to come out: "I am the bird of a cage. /I have the will/ But no gas cutters". ("Fracas") In the third stage, she contemplates the apathy of people and also outlines the reasons for her entrapment: "The world goes on/ Without beaconing me to join them in the firmament/ Of freedom for I am an outcaste in the cellular jail/ Of development and politics of colour". ("The Cracked World") The fourth and the last section of the poems talks about two suicides, two unsuccessful attempts by the mother and one successful attempt by her daughter. Still, no one in the world seems to bother, and the world goes on as usual: "Life was fine./ Life is fine. /Each one of us has to die". ("A Lament") The poem ends with such a tragic note that one is not able to decide as to what is more tragic, the suicide or the apathy and the unconcern of the people. The poet is frustrated to see the suffering of the people, and he stops a while to relax to clarify the delight in his own self. In the next poem, "A Voice", the poet talks about the difficulties a poet faces in defining the process of composing a poem, how the metaphors slip and change suddenly, how the ideas must be recapitulated and restricted, and how slightly prophetic poets are treated in this mundane world. The two sections of "A Voice" are a sort of interlude for discussing other aspects of the alienation of a suffering person. He listens to his poetic voice in poem after poem, and the entire emotional and aesthetical process helps him to unwind himself.

The self of the poet, Susheel Sharma, seems to break all boundaries in the poems and is indeed very vast, though sometimes he appears to assume the Hindu self, sometimes the Christian self, and sometimes the secular self. One may also notice the Allahabadi, Indian, American, and African selves in his poetry. However, those who know the poet may very well note that *Unwinding Self* is a book of Susheel's own self. It is his autobiography, and all the poems in the collection tell something about his life, thought, ambitions, and connections. The poet has lived in various places; therefore, his self is a scattered thing, but the threads of self-assurance and love for *vak*, *arth*, *vakya*, and *rasa* express his confidence, literary abilities, and sensibilities. All the poems in the collection throw light on different plans, programmes, perspectives, and performances of the poet. The various ideas, thoughts, and emotions of the poems are gathered together in diverse strains. The diversity of poems in this book and the variety of themes is quite astonishing and mind boggling. Each of his works demonstrates the intensity of his poems, their sundry strains, and restlessness of the poet to find a place of rest and a sea of silence.

Unlike Wordsworth or Shelley, Susheel Sharma is not the poet of the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” or of the “emotions recollected in tranquillity”. Sharma follows Dickinson’s advice instead. Dickinson writes: “Tell all the truth but tell it slant./... The truth must dazzle gradually”. To prove the point, “The Unborn Poem” may be cited as an example.

I’m looking for a plumber
To check the leaking of symbols
Which may be stored in
The tank up above in the sky
To be borrowed and
Used at afternoon tea-time
When images have to be
Boiled along with rhyme
And rhythm to be served
With cookies laced with
Black and bitter-sweet
Like chokola memories. (p. 77)

To dazzle the reader, the poet changes his roles so swiftly and significantly that the reader lags behind in understanding his various roles: the plumber, the wordsmith, the cook, the store-keeper, and the seeker. The above lines also give the key to unlock Sharma’s creative mind, technique, and art. The poem unwinds his poetic craft nicely. The poem, though simple in diction, contains similes, metaphors, dissimilarities, contradictions, concatenation, and indirect descriptions (*vakrta*). Like Emily Dickinson, Sharma practices ambiguity, indirection, and symbolism. Poetry comes after a great churning and boiling of images. Sharma’s poetry is not the poetry of sweet memories but contains bitter taste like that of chokola. The poem, therefore, becomes a complex creation of free play of words, images, symbols, and structures leading to a myriad of intricate meaning patterns.

The poet’s mind is his poetic workshop where the poems are born with the clash of opposite ideas. Susheel Sharma is no exception to this dictum as one can notice the clash of opposites, like those of negativity and positivity, construction and deconstruction, rightism and leftism, and localism and universalism in his poetry. Besides, one can also notice his agonies, tensions, and frustrations blooming in his work. The problem with the poet is that he runs after the rays of hope and light. He finds himself in a mean, mad, malevolent, malicious, maligned, and marginalised world. The poet finds himself in chains, chains of globalization, fake news, fake love, and fake friendships. As a global poet, professor, and thinker, he is often forced into various operations of self-love, self-esteem, and self-seeking. He often finds himself cut off from the kingdom of God. The kingdom of self pinches him a lot. He lives in an era of confusion, chaos, and disintegration-social, emotional, religious, cultural, economic, political, and typical disintegration. There are several poems in the collection in which the poet becomes the spokesperson of the marginalised, underprivileged, and Dalits. For example, in “Distancing”, the poet is talking about the issues arising because of internal migration. The poem appears to be prophetic as it was published much earlier to the lockdown period in the wake of COVID-19. During the period of the pandemic, the migrant labourers had to face a lot of difficulty not only in staying in the metropolitan towns but also in returning to

their homes. It was a Catch-22 situation for them. The poem also refers to the clash of interests between the locals and the migrants that comes at the instigation of the local political parties. Because of this instigation, the slogans about national unity and one identity appear to be hollow.

Poetry is a deceptive art. Like politics, it says something and means another. The poet uses all methods of language like *abhidha*, *lakshana* and *vyanjana* to unwind his self-uttering cries that are almost human. The critical sentence *vakyam rasatmak kavyam* applies to each poem. To a poet and critic even *rasanubhav* is important. The unity of thought, time, emotion, and place includes symmetry and universality. It is because of this that Sharma is able to write about black experience, doxies, females, beggars, and even animals. This book cannot be understood in the light of Laksmikant Verma's *kavita ke naye pratiman* or Namvar Singh's *nai kavita ke pratiman*, but Bharat's famous sutra, "*Vibhavanubhava Vyabhichari Samyogad Rasa Nispatti*" ("विभावानुभावव्यभिचारिसंयोगाद्रस निष्पत्तिः।"), helps the reader. In this book, *rasa* is born out of wit, irony, figures of speech, and Sharma's academic experiences as a linguist. *Rasa* is produced in this book out of a special person, special poet, special event, special character, special stories, special causes and effects, and accessories. It is the *rasaniayata* of the book which compels the reader to read this book of poems. The book is produced by a nationally *sanskritised* person who leaves no stone unturned in self-assurance, self-defence, ambitions, self-awareness, self-consciousness, and self-knowledge. The book is a record of the poet's self-congratulatory, poetic, critical, and religious self. The poet finds himself shut in his own anglicized self which struggles to come out of the cocoon; life's various hues and colours enable him to sustain self, and these hues come to his rescue.

There is a place for local, national, and universal in this book. Sharma is able to empathize not only with brown sahibs and plebeians but also with black impecunious slaves and sex-workers. Like Afro-American poet Langston Hughes, he highlights their sufferings, and one can feel that the poet and the social activist are walking together. Susheel Sharma is a conscious and careful artist who is well-versed in Eastern and Western civilisations, cultures, religions, politics, and ethos. The forty-two poems in the book are the products of his conscious art, thought, and planning and are an impromptu parade of his learning. This book attempts to think in terms of images, metaphors, symbols, and allusive technique. It is difficult to understand the poems in the first go, and one has to go through them again and again to unravel their meaning and appreciate the genius of the poet. However, the titles of the poems are like pegs in a room which carry the imagery, symbols, and metaphors of his poems. Without sufficient contemplation on the problems the world has been facing, one cannot arrive at any meaning in these poems, and the book is likely to collapse for an uninformed and casual reader.