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Susheel Kumar Sharma, *The Door is Half Open*. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers & Distributors. 2012. ISBN: 978-81-8435-341-9. pages 141, ₹ 150.00/ US \$ 10.00 /UK £ 15.00

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The anthology under review is a collection of fifty-two poems on diverse topics assembled under a suggestive title “The Door is Half Open”. The anthology could very well be seen as a poetic itinerary which culminates in the poet’s realization of his poetic and spiritual self. What strikes most about the collection is that it contains candid observations of a poetic individual who has been there in the world and endured it like a dispassionate seer. The poet adopts different personas through the collection as he sometimes seems to have acquired the role of a hermit, on other occasions it is that of a thwarted artist, a social conscience keeper, a lover, an observer and a philanthropist. The poet is an Oedipus like figure who has erred and seeks his redemption through living/ penance. The expansion of the poetic vision is clearly discernible as the poet struggles through the personal/public state of affairs. The estrangement felt by the poet on several occasions due to the fatigue and ennui caused by the complex modern lifestyle takes him to the edge of the living experience and hence the urgency or the soul’s deep craving for spiritual awakening. One of the poems, significantly titled as “Crisis” is worth quoting:

I don’t have to look into
My wallet to find a piece of paper
To know who I am and to
Wear a mask accordingly. (p.13)

The high point of self realization is the final line: “I’ve embraced peace now.” (p.13)

The very first poem titled “Ganga Mata- A prayer” is of topical relevance as it voices serious ecological concerns and attempts to reinforce the age-old reputation of the ancient Indian River. Poems like, “Routine”, “Dilemma”, “One Step Together”, “Grief”, “Camouflage”, “Struggle”, “Masquerade” ensue from the excruciating experience of the poet’s “social self”. ‘Memory’ and ‘desire’ seem to be at work in most of the poems and they seem to trivialize the poet’s encounter with the present events and happenings. The juxtaposition of calm and serene past life with the anarchic present invokes pertinent images. Childhood experiences, ancient knowledge received through saints, preachers and reformers and discussion of moral values and the degeneration of human self in our times are some of the themes woven through the anthology. Socio-economic problems particularly the rich and the poor divide have found expressions in various poems. For example, the poet observes in the poem titled “Dilemma”: “Is it really possible for one/ to remain poor and / Also to hold the head high?” (p.17).

“For a Bride Who Thinks of Suicide”, “Nithari and Beyond”, “Democracy: Old and New” are the poems which cry out the need for a social and political regeneration of India. The poet’s vision is humanistic and his writings confirm his faith in the spiritual unity of the world demolishing all barriers of

caste, class, colour, gender and nationality. Some of the poems are marked by a personal conflict arising in his mind due to the clash between the individual needs and social needs. The poet's positioning as a middle class citizen and the expression of his dilemmas and quandaries make the anthology a relevant voice in the contemporary scenario. The poet's existence in the mortal and sordid world seems to be full of inconsequential acts, futile memories and hopeless prospects. He reflects on his despair in the poem "Dwellings" in the following words:

For Autumn had come
But Spring could not
Locate my home.
Laden with colourful leaves
He passed by like a stranger on the road. (p. 23)

Susheel Sharma stands true to the role of the poet as a "conscience-keeper" and a "critical insider" who fearlessly voices his humanistic concerns. Overall, the poet has adopted a familiar persona to which every sensible, urban, thinking individual can relate to. The deliberations of a conflicted mind find expression in the poem "Purgation":

The memory returns
Like Halley's Comet
Does after every seventy six years
To make me feel
That I've not grown an inch
Unlike the wild fire
That threatens to kill
An orangutang. (p. 82)

The agonizing experience of living in a sordid universe is captured adequately through plurality of voices and variety of moods. Stuck deep into the mire the heart of the poet cries out for the purification of the soul:

A conch is rising from the lotus.
The conch is covered with
A design of a world.
The world is a jungle.
The jungle is burning.
Fire consumes sins.

Fire consumes virtues.
After Purgation
Nothing remains.
Brahma is revealed. (p. 83)

Oneness with the inner self and the divine self leads to the self-knowledge. Apparently, the anthology begins with an invocation to the goddess Ganges and ends with a poem entitled “Liberation at Varanasi” which encapsulates the poet’s traversing of the life- journey through different episodes in life. Thus, the culmination of the poetic process is the attainment of the highest truth, i.e. the high point of the human existence as reflected in the following lines:

Hope gives me courage
To enter the gates of Heaven
Where I have to face God
To accept my retribution. (p. 90)

Hope gives courage to us to get rid of our pain. In the end, I would like to mention that Susheel Sharma’s second anthology *The Door is Half Open* is an authentic and relevant expression of humanistic concerns and it justifies its ends in a very refreshing manner.

Now, a few words about the Glossary and the Afterword- the subsequent parts of the anthology. The anthology seems to be a conglomeration of diverse thoughts and convictions – the prominent among them is the Ancient Indian thought generously strewn throughout the anthology. The glossary assists the foreign reader or the one who is unaware of Indian system of thought and belief by providing denotative as well as connotative meanings of the Sanskrit hymns and Hindi words and phrases. The Glossary is of great functional importance and is not merely there for the ornamentation of the anthology. The culture specific allusions have been aptly explained in the Glossary and provide comprehensive explanations with an aim to spread information about Indian culture and Literature.

The Afterwords or the Epilogue appended to the anthology further comes to the aid of unskilled readers in their understanding and appreciation of poetry. The Critiques/Comments/Reviews by the Indian as well as Western scholars reinforce the validity and richness of Indian thought and culture. One is mesmerized by the reflections of Barbara Wühr on Susheel Sharma’s poetry. One is also left to wonder how much familiarity Westerners have about Indian religions and life. Barbara deftly juxtaposes Indian metaphysical questions and thoughts with their counterparts in western system. The anthology is engaging in terms of treatment of materialistic as well as spiritual questions. Overall, one feels assured of the corrective and restorative influence of literature through the writings of Susheel Sharma and the appreciation and understanding of his poetry will further subsist the cause.

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