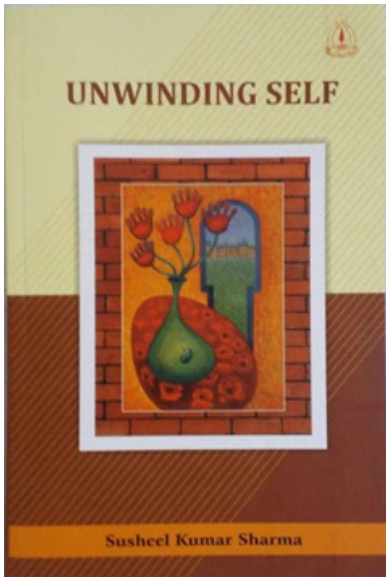
Book Review

Susheel Kumar Sharma. *Unwinding Self: A Collection of Poems.* Cuttack: Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute, 2020, pp. 152, PB, Price: ₹ 250, $ 15, € 20, ISBN: 978-81-943450-3-9.

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One of the greatest theoreticians of poetry, Mammta, in his immortal poetics called *Kavya Prakash* classifies all poetry into three categories: 'Dhvani kavya', 'Gunibhutavyangyakavya' and 'Chitrakavya'. This classification is current as Uttam, Madhyama and Adhama. *Unwinding Self*, the third collection of 42 poems of unequal lengths, by Susheel Kumar Sharma, in my estimation, belongs to Mammata's first category, viz. Dhvanikavya or Poetry of Suggestion. Each poem of the volume is illustrative of 'Dhvani' or Suggestion and deserves to be called first-rate poetry or Uttamkavya. This becomes amply clear when we get acquainted with the concept of 'Dhvani'. We all know that there are three verbal powers called 'Abhidha', 'Lakshna' and 'Vyanjana'. When a statement carries a meaning that is the product of the literal or plain sense of its words, we can say that the statement is 'Abhidhamulak' or based on the verbal power called 'Abhidha' or its most common and popular sense. For example, take up the sentence, "His name is Richard." Here the sense is very clear and it causes no problem to its understanding. But consider the sentence: "Pen is mightier than the sword." Here, the sense is not clear at all because the 'pen,' however large or well-built it may be, can never match a sword. Unless we take the metaphoric or symbolic sense of 'pen' and 'sword' namely, 'scholars' or 'media-persons' and 'soldiers' respectively, the sentence will remain a problem. Here, 'Lakshana' or 'Connotation' is at work. But when a statement goes beyond its literal as well as its connotated meaning, the verbal power is called 'Suggestion' (*Vyanjana*). For example, take up the last line of "To Autumn" by John Keats,

namely, "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies" where the idea of the infinity of Autumnal songs is suggested, transcending all limits of literalness (*Abhidheyta*) as well as connotationalness (*Lakshanikata*) of the word used in the line. 'Dhvanikavya' is based on the last verbal power called 'Vyanjana'. The meaning accruing from the use of 'Vyanjanakta' or suggestive words is called 'Vyangyartha' or 'Dhvanyartha' and the resulting poetry is called 'Dhavikavya' or suggestive kind of poetry. In Mammata's scheme of critical hierarchy, second stands the category of poetry called 'Gunibhutavyangyakavya' or the poetry where the suggested meaning is relegated to the ground and the literal meaning of the words used is what matters. Evidently, this category of poetry relies on the common sense of words, current among the speakers of the language concerned. The lowest division of poetry consists of poems that attract and impress the readers by their artfulness or ornateness – too much use of various poetic devices, tropes and figures of speech, exemplified by works like *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* by James Joyce. Mammata's division of poetry matches the category of the readers of poetry mentioned in the following verse of *Vishnudharmottara Purana*:

रेखां शंसन्ति हयाचार्या: वर्तिनी तु विचक्षणा: ।
स्त्रियो भूषणमिछन्ति वर्णाढ्यमितरे जनाः । ।

[The highest category of the readers of poetry called 'Acharyas' look for 'Rekha' (suggestion) in poetry; the second category (of the readers of poetry) called 'Vichakshanas' or intelligent interpreters who attach value to the 'Vartini' or style of the poet displayed in the poem; the womanish readers prize the figures of speech or style of the poet displayed in the poem under discussion, whereas the rest of the readers remain contended with the rest 'Varnadhya' or the literal meaning of words.]

Bearing in mind what I have affirmed above, I have no doubt whatsoever the third volume of poems by Susheel Kumar Sharma entitled *Unwinding Self* belongs to what Mammta calls 'Uttamkavya' or first-rate poetry or the poetry of suggestion. Each of its 42 poems appears to be a collection of baffling puzzles, defying common sense but read between the lines, each piece goes beyond what 'meets the eyes'. What the great grammarian Patanjali, observes in his *Mahabhashya* in the ninth 'Pratika' or subsection of the 'Prathamam Paspashahnikam', regarding the grammarless readers applies equally to unperceptive connoisseurs of poetry:

उत त्वः पश्यन्न ददर्श वाचमुत त्वः शृण्वन्न शृणोत्येनाम् ।
उतो त्वस्मै तन्वं वि सस्रे जायेव पत्य उशती सुवासाः ॥४॥ (ऋग्वेदः सूक्तं 10.71.4)

[The grammarless reader does not see the speech even if he does see it or does not hear it despite the fact that he does hear it.]

Indeed, for a superficial reader, the poems in *Unwinding Self* are meaningless jottings but for those who could discern the inner or hidden meanings that these pieces convey, the volume is a priceless collection of deep-felt experiences of the poet within or without him. The word 'Self' in the title should not be taken in the sense of the poet's psyche but rather in its broadest sense in its monistic sense of 'Atmatattva' or 'Brahma' which is all inclusive. The Upanishadic mantras like 'Tattvamasi' and 'Aham Brahmasmi' clearly support this. The expression 'unwinding self' has to be taken in the sense of the unravelling or analysing threadbare anything and everything — visible or invisible – nothing is beyond its pale, it includes all that is personal or impersonal—outer or inner. Just have a look at the titles of the poems and you will realize their scope. They are esoteric as well as exoteric. "Theme for English B" is there but "Kabir's Chadar" has not been forgotten either.

In order to bring out the "dhvanyatra" or the underlying suggestive meaning of the statements of the volume, I will take up just two extracts and explain them in my own way clarifying my views on the poems. First, the fifth stanza of the opening poem entitled "Snapshots". It reads as follows:

> Tsunami hits Japan.
> God is resting in Heaven.
> Where is my old father?
> Emails will be checked later. (lines 19-22)

Apparently, all the four sentences used in the stanza constitute the poet's observations made on different occasions without any unifying factor linking them together. To an ordinary reader, they will strike as mere jottings, nothing more. But please remember that there is method in madness. If you read all the statements with care, you shall find a link, making them a unified whole. It seems that the speaker of the poem has just heard of the news of Tsunami in Japan. Naturally, he first gets worried about the safety of his father who cannot flee the place where he is at the moment. Tsunami that hits Japan, may hit India too, and very soon because it moves with a very great speed. The speaker's father, being old, must be removed to a place of safety without losing a moment. The speaker does not know the present location of his father; he has to be located at the earliest. But the speaker is an ultra-modern person, having a laptop which has become a part and parcel of his life. Emails on the laptop have to be checked – that is the speaker's daily routine.

But is there time enough, available to the speaker for checking the e-mails and locating his father? First thing first. He must first find out his father and take him to a place of safety. E-mails can be checked at a later stage – at leisure. Though the speaker is an ultra-modern man, having a laptop on his back he has good 'samskaras' and cares for his old father. But what about the second line of the extract? In my view, the line reveals another feature of the speaker's personality. He is not one of those who depend on divine help in the hour of calamity. He mockingly says that God is 'resting' in Heaven and therefore it is futile to wait for His help. He would, therefore, rely on his own resources to protect his old father from Tsunami in the event of its visiting India. He is clearly a self-reliant modern man with a tinge of agnosticism, characteristic of the modern man's irreligious attitude to God. Thus, despite the imagistic and surrealistic form in which the extract stands couched, it emerges as a coherent unit, full of meaningful ideas born of 'Dhvani' or suggestion that goes beyond what has been stated.

The other extract that I would like to discuss is the ninth stanza of the last poem entitled "Stories from the Mahabharata", a collection of 25 haikus:

> The dog can't bark anymore.
> The tutor shows loyalty.
> A Bhil's son loses his thumb. (25-27)

We all know that the *Mahabharata* is the greatest epic poem of the world – greatest because of its magnitude, containing as it does, more than one lakh of verses – couplets as well as quartets, surpassing Homer's epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey,* Virgil's *Aeneid,* Dante's *Divine Commedia* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*—all taken together. The Indian epic contains lakhs of stories out of which poet Sharma has chosen only 25. The original takes several pages for each selected stories but here the poet presents those stories in a space of 15 to 17 words each which indeed is a miraculous performance. So far as the ninth story that Sharma treats occurs in the opening part of the pic called "Aadiparva". The expression "A Bhil's son" in the third line of the extract, cited above is the clue to the story concerned. The original Sanskrit text does not use the word 'Bhil' – it uses the word 'Nishada', a forest tribe living among Vindhya hills. But the popular Indian word to denote that tribe is 'Bhila'. The reference is to story of Eklavya, the son of Hiranyadhanu, the head of the Nishadas. One of the Hindi poets of the era of 'Chhayavada' – Dr. Rama Kumar Verma – had produced a whole epic, famous as *Eklavya* (Allahabad: Bharati Bhandar, 1958). So we must admire the craftsmanship of Susheel Sharma in

presenting the whole story of Eklavya in just fifteen words. Let us see how. The first line of the extract displays his extraordinary archery by closing the mouth of a dog which was disturbing his practice of throwing arrows before the image of Dronacharya, after his having been rejected by the guru to accept him as one of the disciples as he had done in the case of numerous princes apart from Kauravas and Pandavas. The incident alluded to in the first line of the extract involves the discovery by the Kaurava and Pandava. princes on a hunting spree, especially Arjuna, that their teacher had a disciple, hitherto unknown to them, who could silence the barking dog with his arrows by closing his mouth without hurting it in anyway. The second line presumes our knowledge that Guru Drona had privately confessed to Arjun who was surprised most to find that his guru had another disciple who was far-far superior to him in archery. And thus, the guru who was a suspect had ultimately to establish his loyalty by confronting Eklavya who publicly declared that Dronacharya was his real guru. Then the embarrassed guru asked the 'bhila' to pay him his *gurudakshina* (teacher's fee). The truly dedicated disciple was prepared to pay any price to the satisfaction of the guru who cleverly asked for the right hand's thumb of the disciple who gladly and instantly obliged his teacher. Thus, the teacher proved his 'loyalty' to Arjuna and his master Bhishma and Dhritarashtra. We must admire Susheel Sharma's art displayed here in conjuring forth before us the entire story of Eklavya and his dedication within a space of fifteen words only by means of a few highly suggestive words like 'bark anymore', 'loyalty', 'A Bhil's son' and 'loses his thumb'. His command of 'Vastudhvani' is matchless indeed. But he has yet to achieve mastery over Alamkaradhvani and above all 'Rasadhvani', the supreme form of Dhvani as conceived by Anandavardhana in his *Dhvanyaloka*. However, the connoisseur can enjoy the poems of *Unwinding Self* by reading each line with great care in order to grasp the suggested sense residing in the crucial word dominating the texture of piece concerned. Let us hope that the poet will soon publish a volume of verse having 'Rasadhvani', too.

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