
**THE DOOR IS AJAR: PEEPING THROUGH SUSHEEL KUMAR SHARMA'S
SECOND BOOK OF POEMS**PRADIP MONDAL
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The book *Sightlines: View points on Susheel Kumar Sharma's The Door is Half Open*, edited by the poet Danielle Hanson offers the readers some fascinating essays on Susheel Kumar Sharma's second book of poems *The Door is Half Open* (2012). Most of these scholarly essays were published earlier in different journals over the course of a decade. Hanson has done a marvellous job by meticulously choosing the best 20 essays on Sharma's book for this volume on Sharma's second collection of poems. Not only that, she has also included four fascinating interviews (including one by herself) with the poet.

In the "Introduction" to the book, the editor talks about the myriad possibilities and umpteen perspectives for the readers by peeping through a half-opened door. The title of Sharma's poetry book is really evocative. The title reminds one of a book of poetry by the Late-Modern American poet Theodore Roethke, *Open House* (1941) which is about the poetic process of self-discovery—a theme common in the Romantic tradition. But Sharma's book opens before our eyes some harsh realities that he happened to come across in India. The reader cannot obtain a crystal-clear view of the events that are happening behind the partially-opened door. The reader has to form his/her own meanings in an age of post-truth. So, there is no wonder that some of the authors speculate about the meanings of the title of Sharma's book. Again, Roethke spent ten years writing *Open House*, which was critically acclaimed upon its publication. Sharma has spent almost 13 years on this collection (*The Door is Half Open*), after his first collection, *From the Core Within* which came out in 1999. The present anthology is the second anthology, on the same collection. What better example of critical reception is needed than this?

In his second book of poetry, Sharma deals with environmental concerns, societal injustice, crises in civilization, personal grief, prayer, hope, and dream among other topics. The

book, comprising 52 poems, starts with a meditative poem on the river Ganga and ends with a poem in which he seeks *moksha* (salvation) by bathing at the ghats of Varanasi. In the opening poem *Ganga Mata—A Prayer*, we find that after invoking Maa Ganga, the poetic persona tells the reader that he does not want nuclear or thermal projects near the Ganga because they would adversely affect the holy river. Rather, he only wants the world to be rid of corruption, pollution, and degeneration. Towards the end of the poem we find the lines “How long/ Will you keep on /Tolerating insult?” (Sharma 8). This line recalls a famous song (originally in Bengali, then re-sung in Hindi) by Bhupen Hazarika, *O Ganga Behti Ho Kyun?* (“O Ganga! Why are you flowing?”). Hazarika thinks that Ganga should no more tolerate corruption and pollution and she should stop flowing. Sharma in this poem too laments about the deterioration of the Ganga. He pleads for a restoration of the Ganga in its original shape. As I first read Sharma’s poems from his second collection, I found that through his poems Sharma celebrates the democratic spirit, somewhat in line with Walt Whitman.

Out of twenty essays, six deal with ecological concerns in his poetry, three focus on structural aspects, two study recurrent themes and motifs in Sharma’s poetry, two engage with social concerns, two explore the use of Indian mythology. So, it is discernible that Sharma’s poetry has been studied from various critical perspectives. Finally, four engaging interviews make it a complete book which promises to be a reader’s sheer delight.

The first essay by Arbind Kumar Choudhary mainly dwells on Sharma’s use of native words to give his poetry a more authentic flavour. He mentions how Sharma makes use of different names of Ganga in his opening poem. He also discusses divine elements in some of his poetry. Apart from mythical connotations in Sharma’s poetry, Binod Mishra and Rangnath Thakur in their essay discuss the glorification of rustic life in *Gopalpur at Sea*, in which the poet conveys how urbanization adversely impacts the beatitude of the sea. The authors also show, how in line with Yeats’ *Byzantium*, Sharma’s last poem in this collection, *Liberation at Varanasi* sticks to the age-old belief that ablution in the water of the Ganges absolves one of earthly sins.

In the essay by Gurrupu Damodar, we find an interesting discussion on the poem *Gifts*. In this poem, Sharma respects all creations of earth, be it a mere ant. In this respect, I am reminded of Roethke who in some of his poems examines the barely visible insects like beetles, bacteria, and lice. According to his belief, each organism has its role to play in the cycle of life. I am also reminded of Blake who observes in the poem *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

(1790): “Everything that lives is Holy” (Stevenson 129). So, we can say that Sharma bats for democracy in the scheme of Nature.

Karen J. Head in her essay opines that Sharma’s book has an epic stature, not in the Classical sense but in its journeys across the seas and coming back to streets and the rivers of India. She shows, how following the traditions of three religious faiths, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity, Sharma’s poems take the reader on an epic journey towards peace, understanding, and amity. She rightly observes that in the poet-persona’s epic journeys, he meets monsters in the forms of poverty and war. She explains that like Odysseus, the poet-speaker decides to return to his hometown Varanasi.

Mary Mohanty in her essay makes a comparative analysis of Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey* and Sharma’s *Ganga Mata—A Prayer*. This essay explores the ecological and cultural implications of the anthropocene in these poems. In his discussion on the poem *Spineless-II*, N. S. R. Ayengar asserts that the poet has accurately shown how the onslaughts of modern civilization corrode our familiar boundaries and eat through our value system. He also avers that through his poem *Mangoes*, the poet “metonymically transfigures what a man’s life should be” (Hanson 75). In her essay, Nataša Miladinović meticulously studies symbols and archetypes in Sharma’s poetry. Rabindra Kumar Verma in his article comments that Sharma shows socio-cultural and political consciousness by weaving the reality of Indian society with a tinge of spirituality. Syed Ahmad Raza Abidi in his chapter observes that inspired by Hindu mythology, his poems are rooted deep into the Indian soil and they reflect complex social dynamics of India. Wendy J Truran in her study remarks that Sharma not only explores the subjects of pain and societal injustice, but also shows the way of hope and peace.

In his interview with T Sai Chandra Mouli, Sharma talks about his upbringing, what shaped him as a poet, his ideological approach as a poet, his use of symbols and images, his take on the modern trends of Indian Poetry in English (IPE). In his conversations with Syed Ahmad Raza Abidi, Sharma opines, “When nothing gives pleasure, hope and light can turn one to poetry. Poetry is the last recluse of the downtrodden, dark, marginalised, voiceless, speechless, and the weakest of the weak” (Hanson 301). The poet expresses his personal view that he does not believe in the theory of “Art for Art’s Sake” because as one takes a lot from society, so he/she should discharge some duties/responsibilities towards society. Sharma believes that “religion may give some comfort to some but not a solution to the existing or

newly emerging social, political and economic challenges”, but “poetry gives space not only to a voice against any social practice but also to an individual” (Hanson 308).

In his discussion with Suresh Chandra Dubey, Sharma opines that “a poet must make a quest for truth, even if it is at the cost of personal freedom” (Hanson 316). Finally in the tête-à-tête with the editor Danielle Hanson, Sharma deliberates that in Indian spiritual poetry there are two trends: “poems eulogising the deeds and virtues of the deity” (Hanson 340) and “poems that showcase the melancholy that God is not paying due attention to the devotee and therefore complaints are being made” (Hanson 340). The poet comments that his long poem *Ganga—A Prayer* has both traits besides being “ebullient and melancholic” simultaneously. All these interviews are full of the poet’s stance about the role of poetry vis-à-vis society.

Finally, I would say that the book has many merits but not without one or two demerits as well. These are i) There is repetitiveness of ideas in a handful of essays, ii) Most of the quotes (apart from Sharma’s book) used in the essays are either not cited or poorly cited, iii) Two consecutive essays by the same author could have been avoided. Despite these minor drawbacks, I would definitely recommend readers of poetry to purchase a copy of this book soon.

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