



The Poetry of Sunil Sharma: An Expression of Love and Liberal Humanism

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Some poets are concerned with their own personal relationships - their poetry speaks of loves, fears, their children and so on from a self-centred position; others are concerned with cultural, spiritual and mystical themes carrying themselves and their readers to ethereal worlds; still others are orientated towards hard-hitting politically activist themes in an attempt to help fix a fractured world. Sharma's poems are informed by a *liberal humanism* which at times encapsulates all of the above themes though in subtle and gentle ways. As an example consider the following emotionally charged lines from "The Children of the Indian Flower-sellers" (Sharma, GC):

*The eldest one tends
The dark tiny shack
That juts out -
On the huge garbage heap,
On the borders of the teeming ugly metro -
And babysits the sick sibling,
That constantly cries
The pitiable bundle of bones and brown skin -
In the stifling summer heat,
Both awaiting a tired mother
Who will come home very late. (Lines 29 -39)*

Humanism as a philosophical doctrine has various interpretations, one of these is that humans are the pinnacle of creation and that the world should be expected to support and nurture humans at all costs. Believing and 'living' this interpretation is largely responsible for the global environmental destruction and alienation from nature we are currently witnessing. This is absolutely *not* the meaning of *liberal humanism*. Liberal humanism recognises that all humans regardless of class, race, gender, age, religious beliefs, and position in society are equally important. It is an ethical system that recognises human dignity as of vital importance, not over and above nature, but together with and part of the totality of existence. Clearly the above excerpt shows Sharma's powerful, though gentle 'alert' for more consideration for those less fortunate than ourselves. The poem alludes to the children as unwanted rubbish, like that of the garbage, in the garbage heap that is their home!

This brings in the notion of "existential authenticity" and that without respect for each other and the world of nature that supports us we cannot embrace that authenticity. Further discussion of this philosophical position is beyond the scope of this essay, suffice to say Sharma in his life, his fiction writing and in his poetry embraces existential authenticity in his practice and articulation of liberal humanism. In his own words referring to the India of the 70-80s; "That liberal-humanism and commitment for the downtrodden still forms my inner vision and overall outlook on life and informs my writing." (Harle)



Sharma is a prolific writer with his wide-ranging work being published in anthologies, newspapers, academic journals, online and in books. These works have a global reach and receive excellent critical acclaim not only in his native India but also in the United Kingdom, America, Europe, South Africa and Australia. In addition to his own creative writing, he has edited and co-edited numerous anthologies and literary journals. Though this essay is a focus on his poetry, it is worth mentioning his important fiction and non-fiction publications.

The Structuralist Philosophy of The Novel: A Marxist Perspective has generated good critical response. *The Minotaur*, his debut novel published in India was also released in 2009 in South Africa. Six short stories and *The Minotaur* were prescribed for Post-colonial studies at Clayton University, Georgia, USA and have recently been re-introduced for undergraduate students. A PhD student is using this novel as part of her PhD thesis with two other political novels in English from India. *Delightful Dickens*, a recent anthology was published in India, and *Acerbic Anthology* by Createspace, USA. *Luncheon on the Grass* is his latest short fiction story collection recently published in India.

In addition to the poetry anthologies he is represented in and has just co-edited the *Indo-Australian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*. This major publication, running to nearly 400 pages, features some of the best poets in both India and Australia and will become a classic for the side-by-side comparison of contemporary poetry from these respective countries.

Sunil Sharma has three published collections of his own poetry; *Golden Cacti*, *Poems on Highway* and most recently, *Mundane My Muse*. It is within the covers of these three books that we will find the glistening gems awaiting discovery. Sharma has been honoured in many ways but it was his award as International Community of Poets, Poet of The Year 2012 (Destiny Poets, UK) which was specially deserved and appreciated.

Salman Rushdie has suggested that one function of poetry is “...to stop the world going to sleep.” I agree with this and believe it should be a primary function of all poetry. Nowhere better can we find this happening than in the poetry of Sunil Sharma. In a sense the following poem, “Lunch”, (Sharma, GC) which I am going to quote in full, encapsulates much of Sharma's poetic insight, and his ability to use simple language and situations to produce such a powerful emotional impact on the reader and help them – wake up!

*She eats lunch
Spread out on a table of rough stones
This frail stone-breaker.
The lunch consists of dried chappatis
And mango-pickle
Carefully wrapped in
Yesterday's daily paper.
The dust
Of breaking stones blows and mixes
With her thin wheat-chappatis dear.*



*Unmindful of the din,
Under the frugal shadow of a dusty
Tamarind tree,
She sits, holds lunch in her thin hands
And eats slowly,
Surrounded by hard stones everywhere.
Morsels swallowed hard
Washed down with
Polluted water
From a plastic crumpled bottle.
Rest of the meal she carefully folds,
In the old newspaper,
For her sweating sinewy husband,
Working along with the other stone-breakers,
While my obese teenage son,
Plugged into his iPod
Complains again of less variety
On a well-laid
Rosewood,
Shining
Dining table. (Lines 1 – 31)*

In this poem we witness the 'lowly' job of stone breaking in India, the juxtaposition of a peasant's lunch with the brutal, unforgiving hardness of stone is heart-rending. Part of Sharma's poetic brilliance is to capture the emotional impact of a situation without actually "thumping the table" so to speak, to help bring about social change. The quiet, non-aggressive 'observation' of this activity has a more powerful influence on the reader than perhaps making aggressive demands for change.

The juxtaposition of the poor sinewy stone-breakers with the wealthy, obese, spoilt son is quite clear, nonetheless powerful for this though. Not so obvious is the counterpoint of "a table of rough stones" with the "shining Rosewood table"; "chappati lunch" with "well-laid table"(abundance). Morsels swallowed "hard" next to "hard stones", this poem is a masterpiece in the use of imagery, subtle counterpoint and emotional impact.

In ancient times poetry was thought to be divinely inspired from either God, the gods or The Muses. In the West, modern science, including neurophysiology, psychology, chemistry and physics would have us believe that poetry like other expressions of the brain-mind come from inner neurochemical processes (Aitchison, 2013). We must be careful not to jump to, and embrace these conclusions supplied by reductionist scientific materialism, too easily and uncritically. There are still many cultures and millions of people, who believe the universe is a conscious entity, as it were, and our brain-minds simply act as a tuner/receiver, then modifier of this universal conscious - Advaita Vedanta is one example.



Sharma talks of the Muses often and feels it is his destiny, and that of other poets, to serve the Divine Muses faithfully in the service of humanity. His poem, "On Words Divine"(Sharma, GC) expresses the beauty of divinely inspired words, a short excerpt:

*It is the words -
Define beloved Shakespeare
From lesser mortals,
The one,
This sweet Bard
Who uses them like colours luminous,
Enriching
Our cracked interiors
And,
The precious gift
Divine. (Lines 17 – 27)*

These divine words are bestowed from a divine source much as the Christian belief of God bestowing Grace. In the poem "Poetry Calling" (Sharma, GC) we witness both a divine element and the poet in the service of community not just performing a solipsistic exercise, again a short excerpt.

*Poetry be not-
Mere self-contemplation,
Self-reflexive,
Self-absorbed.
It be not-
Romancing with neurotic self,
Drug-induced journeys,
Or,
Pains narcissistic, self-inflected
And obsessions private.
But
It be-
A transcendental experience (Lines 11 – 24)*

In this poem Sharma leaves us with no doubt that a poet's responsibility is far greater than massaging a self-absorbed individual ego, "It be a transcendental experience". In the poem, "On Basho" (Sharma, GC) we notice yet another subject dear to Sharma's heart – nature. Here he combines his love of nature, with Basho's love of nature, and that the poet's inspiration comes direct from nature, not solely from with the poet's brain, the second half of the poem below:

*And travelled alone in settings natural.
The wind,
The pond,*



*The frog,
The pine
The road spoke directly to
The kind man
Who could directly hear
Messages delivered by Nature's creatures, (Lines 10 -18)*

Sharma has a deep respect for all the great writers and poets; he is extremely well read and often cites his favourite writers in fiction, poetry and personal correspondence. Of all the writers who have influenced him, Dickens, Tolstoy, Chekov, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Sartre, Camus, Mann, Marquez, Kafka and Prem Chand it is Gorky that inspires him the most. The following quotation is from personal correspondence (Sharma-Harle, 2014) and shows clearly exactly the values Sharma holds, obviously many of these were held by Gorky also.

My love for the downtrodden, workers, toiling women and the underprivileged kids; the brutalization of girl-children and devaluation of women; breaking of the family; cheapening of culture, etc. These issues do not figure prominently in Indian Poetry in English. I call them the Unseen, through empathy we can articulate their pains and joys and express their miserable social conditions. Gorky is my inspiring model, although I am no match to him in any way. My master!

Humility, non-self-promotion, and non-self-aggrandizement are notable features of Sharma's personality and I think we should leave it to history to show he is Gorky's equal in both vision and literary output. Fortunately his native India is far more tolerant of political and social criticism and poetic activists than Gorky's Russia was under Stalin!

James Aitchison in his recently published book, *New Guide to Poetry & Poetics* (Aitchison, 263) discusses in chapter eighteen, "Poetry and Reality", how concepts of reality, and reality relating to poetry especially, change over time. He quotes A. C. Bradley's *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* then goes on to say, "Bradley is saying that poetry exists in areas of mind and modes of thought that are separate from everyday life. He is also saying that poetry is to some extent an escape from the world of external physical reality, an attitude that remains attractive to some poets, critics and readers today." He then goes on to say how Sassoon, Owen, Rosenberg and others, "had made external physical realities – the intimacies and monstrosities of war – the main subjects of their poems..." Bradley's statement is clearly absurd and the fact that some poets write about cold, hard, reality does not in my mind contradict the notion that poetic *inspiration* may come from divine sources. Clearly in Sharma's poetry we experience a deep connection and empathy with the Muses and then an absolute firm grip on, and intimate understanding of day-to-day reality.

Sharma has both feet firmly planted in the global present. The poems in his collection, *Poems on Highway* reflect the dichotomy in contemporary life between the past/present, poverty/wealth, freedom/oppression, starvation/gluttony, nature/urban development with some gentle love poems to balance the offering. His poems are always seeking to show these tensions which empower them with great emotional impact. India is undergoing massive change on many



levels, the poems in both his books, and those published in online and print journals, document many of these changes, and also show regardless of the difficulties we encounter; we are still able to celebrate the human spirit unconditionally. Further, they also show that despite one's dharma love is still possible in any situation. Sunil is passionate about the power of literature and art to provide an antidote to the poison of excessive greed and crass mindless consumption; many of the poems expose the underbelly of such greed.

The disparity of wealth and poverty is evident in many countries but probably nowhere as blatantly side-by-side as in India. As Sharma says:

For me poetry is about giving voice to the mute. It is a celebration of life of those denied a share in the social development by design or apathy of the ruling elites for decades. Every Indian city is a paradox of wealth and poverty. Our job as a writer is to articulate artistically the social condition of the deprived and marginalized. Victor Hugo did that earlier in France. Dickens did that in industrial England and Turgenev did that in Tsarist Russia.(Harle)

In the poem “Fest of Colours” (Sharma, *POH*) he shows the plight of poverty stricken families and pressures young children are under to simply survive.

*The child waits eagerly,
For indifferent clients;
If the big-eyed boy,
In a torn shirt,
Does not sell
The assorted colours off,
And brings some cash for the
Starving family,
He will
Not be able to
Play this Holi.(Lines 12- 22)*

Again in the following poem “Same Road” (Sharma, *MMM*) we witness Sharma commenting on the stark disparity of worldly possessions, the “haves” and the “have-nots”.

*Three kids
In coarse clothes,
Bare feet
Carrying head-loads,
Patiently walking down
Hot tarred road;
Three kids
Rich clothes,
Whizzing by*



*In a pricey car,
Same road! (Lines 1 – 11)*

Many of the poems in *Poems on Highway* either directly or indirectly refer to nature and how mindless, careless, greedy development destroys nature. In the poem “Dust Devil” (Sharma, *POH*), about a tornado style storm we experience the greed that developers have in arrogantly denuding natural habitat, land that should be kept for growing food or wildlife.

*Dust devil
A big dust cloud,
Rising amid the bare-brown fields,
Bereft of vegetation,
Laid waste by the developers
By ceaseless quarrying
For sand to be used
For newer homes to be made soon, (Lines 1 – 8)*

Further on in this poem Sharma evokes devils in the dust storm that scares the children as they run for shelter, into an already broken, thatched home. Witness the subtle contrast with the, “newer homes to be made soon” earlier in the poem, this further implies that these obviously poor people will soon be displaced. And again the subtle association of “the developers” with “swirling devils”. It is these subtle connections or allegorical relationships that are an essential and special feature of Sharma's poetry. Careful close reading of his poetry is essential to yield all these subtle, though powerful connections. The simple normal use of descriptive words and subject matter of day-to-day situations tends to belie the importance and deep meaning contained within his poems.

*The semi-clad kid stares
At the dust-devil,
And runs inside
A thatched
Broken home,
Fearful of all the
Swirling devils –
Lurking
Both the
Outside,
Inside,
A dark home. (Lines 29 – 40)*

Even in the delightful poem, first part quoted below, “The Spring” (Sharma, *POH*) which celebrates the arrival of spring, normally a joyous, positive time, Sharma uses stark contrasts of “fragrance”, “fresh-faced”, “shy smile” with “congested”, “angry”, “full of smog” to create



maximum emotional impact concerning the ways of urban greed and overpopulation compared with the age-old hope and creation of new life that spring brings with it.

*Multi-hued
Fragrant
Spring
Finally
Comes
Late,
A bit
Tentatively
In the
Congested
Angry
Screaming
Asian city
Full of smog,
Blaring horns
Dusty roads
Dark hovels
Gleaming apartments –
Like a fresh-faced
Child,
Arriving
With a
Shy smile,
On tender
Unsteady feet, (Lines 1 -25)*

Similarly in “Bountiful Nature” (Sharma, *POH*, 129) Sharma contrasts the bounty of nature with the destruction wrought upon her by developers, building yet another urban concrete high-rise, the poem talks about the cool breeze (at the start), then later..... the contrasts, final part below.

*Nature bountiful,
A great relief in the
Urban desolation,
To the rampaging man,
Raiding
Destroying nature
For making upscale
High-rises,
By destroying
The trees and the*



Precious

Man groves. (Lines 19 -30)

Referring to much of the currently published Indian writing in English Sharma has this to say;

Even nature, being plundered by the mafia, does not figure in such writing. My poetry essentially raises these issues and records alienation with lower classes and nature, and through this act of recording, tries to establish a re-connect with these “lowly” creatures, human and natural. And get saved by this curative restoration, to become truly human in an inhuman society. (Personal correspondence Sharma-Harle, 2014)

Like all great writers, Sharma says what needs to be said. I reiterate the previously mentioned *lived* philosophy of existential authenticity, regardless of the consequences, no wonder Sharma feels empathy and great respect for Maxim Gorky. Sometimes this treads “on toes” and makes enemies of those who greedily protect the status quo in which they have their miserable, myopic, petty little lives invested. However, every so often Sharma must need to forget the burden that all truly sensitive poets carry and write a more light hearted love poem. Below such a wonderful, gentle poem in its entirety, “Red Feet”(Sharma, *POH*):

The pigeon

With red feet,

Sits majestically,

On the cable,

Warmly kissed by the

Warm wind,

Ruffling feathers

Tingling graceful neck,

The red gleaming in the sun:

A painful

Reminder of

The cherry red

Of your lipstick

And nail polish

Of your tender

White feet,

Encased softly

In red shoes. (Lines 1 – 18)

Again in a long poem “To My Valentine Dear” (Sharma, *POH*, 36) Sharma expresses the deepest feelings of love and respect for his “valentine”, a few caring, very flattering lines; “Black eye-lashes,/That tenderly cover a pair,/Of pure almond-eyes,/Reminding you of the young doe.” (Lines 39 – 42)



Sometimes we can do no better than to let a poet or writer speak for themselves, the extensive quote below is part of a longer piece of personal correspondence from Sunil and is coincidentally contained in the Preface of his third volume of poetry with the unusual title – *Mundane, My Muse*. This personal statement reinforces the truism that many serious, committed poets see almost all things as poetry or at least in a poetic way. Firstly, a poem of my own in which I allude to this, titled “Blood on the Knife”. This was recently published in an anthology *Rhyme With Reason* (Wrixon). Sunil also has poetry in this anthology, part of the poem below.

*He sees all things as poetry,
the rocks, the waves, the earth.
And knows the secrets of the womb
that most folks lose at birth.*

*The scientists say he's crazy,
they can't dissect his truth.
They poke and probe with blinkered eyes,
searching for some proof.*

*He knows they'll never understand,
for poetry is life.
Not just words upon a page,
but the blood upon the knife. (Lines 1 – 12)*

From the Preface to *-Mundane, My Muse!*

Poetry can be discovered in most unlikely places. For example, sitting in the atrium of a big mall, facing a gushing fountain on a hot humid May-end Mumbai evening, you say to your companion, surrounded by all the twinkling fairy lights and fir potted trees placed strategically on the white marble floor, “How poetic!” The crystalline water jet shooting up in a column against a darkening sky in the middle of a soulless glass-n-concrete and sanitized property can be a great diversion for a tired shopper left poorer by few thousands by that sexy and seductive commercial space: The vertical movement of pure drops of H₂O can be a big visual relief in a place that registers the maximum footfalls these days in Mumbai or Madrid, Delhi or Peshawar. Malls are the new temples and churches for the post-modern Odysseus hunting for treasures and exotic fare and the urban tribes in Dubai or Kenya find time there to congregate. After gleefully splurging more than you have ever planned and secretly planning to go ascetic for a whole year in your personal expenditure, you, the tired Ulysses, decide to sit down on an empty bench and then---suddenly discover the solitary fountain singing merrily on the hot and humid evening. For the other adjacent happy chatterers on the Blueberry, it is a fixture, a prop; for you, it is sheer poetry in a pricey impersonal place, a symbol of purity and eternity. Poetry in slow motion. Water that priceless thing triggers a primeval response in a subterranean crevice of your overtaxed brain and connects you immediately with the first spontaneous priests of raw nature that wandered the earth, at the dawn of the civilization. You feel transported to a dim age when



your distant ancestors conversed eagerly with early gods and twinkling stars and swaying trees and murmuring rivers, finding everything in the universe living and sacred. They talked with the gods and gods with them under starry nights and on fresh dawns, near crystalline rivers full of marine life. All this harmony was recorded in delightful and sublime verses, in epic poetry by the all-seeing ancient minds. There were few facilities then but poetry was a presiding deity of their immediate life; to-day, there are facilities galore but poetry, that musicality, that harmony, is sadly absent. Or, almost. The poetic spirit has started disappearing in prosaic times. Poetry is like the Golden Barrel Cacti--- critically endangered, rare species in the Mexican wild, yet surviving the tough conditions. Poetry is a surviving link with our heroic past, with our mythological memory, with a unique moment when man and god were not yet cruelly split but were real for the other and having a continual dialogue. Like this plant, it is endangered and becoming exotic. But it is a great survivor that adapts to most arid conditions and challenging habitats and grows in most inhospitable climes and times. It is vital to a polluting age like an oxygen mask. It can detoxify your body filled with an overdose of pills, caffeine and nicotine and other drugs, and raked with a toxic desire for More.

Poetry is like the first rains over a smoggy town: It washes away all the grime and revives the dormant seedlings and revitalizes the corroded cores of your inner- life. It is a strong anti-dote to a frightening spiral of mad chasing of the deadly deadlines on daily basis, mechanically performing all the time in office and home and suffering indifferent colleagues, public venues and neighbourhoods that define social existence of competing individuals, and dreaming dollars and economic migrations inside/outside the country of your origin. Finally, poetry is coming face to face with your spiritual truths that refuse to be commodified and reified by a mass culture. It fulfils you and makes you whole, like the tiny church-bells chiming on a wintry desolate evening in the Chekhovian land.

I must say I have never read a better description of what poetry really is than in the second part (paragraph) of the above description by Sharma – “washing away the grime and reviving dormant seedlings”, is exquisitely stated, poetry for Sharma is similar to a baptismal font in that it cleanses the soul, regardless of how it is embedded in the mud of the world. Poetry is like the lotus flower growing to perfection out of this mud.

Dr. Sunil Sharma is a voice to be reckoned with, his poetry and fiction writing are being increasingly sought after for anthologies and other quality journals. These works are also gaining positive critical appraisal and as previously mentioned are being included in various university study programs. Sharma often pays tribute to other great writers and artists in his poetry, so it is only fitting that I finish this necessarily brief essay on his prolific creative writing output, and the philosophy that drives him with a recent poem he composed for one of Australia's greatest living poets, Les Murray. Murray is a living poetic treasure in Australia similar to that of Jayanta Mahapatra in India. This poem is from *Poems on Highway* and is titled “Reclaiming a Home in Bunyah”.

*Les Murray returns from Sydney
To reclaim a personal heritage –*



*His childhood home
Full of memories of
Time spent on
A dairy farm;
Of a woodcutter father
Working hard there,
Mother who died,
And a feud silent
Between a grandfather
And a dad,
Unable to forget and forgive,
The trees full of white ants,
That killed one of the siblings.
The promised farm never materialized,
And his dad went back to the tree-cutting,
In order to survive;
The return from Sydney
Was reclaiming his regional
Australian roots,
And finding again there
The continent's true face!
Among the aboriginals, farmers and authors,
The great Murray,
The Bard of Australia,
Discovered the Soul of his
Culture that was missing
In the glittering cities.
Urban centers are
Alike these days
Everywhere but the way
Farmers in rural Australia
Work hard against the odds,
Gets mirrored in poets and writers,
And like aboriginals,
These communities carry nature
Within their selves as sacred,
And that act of getting connected
With nature in a sublime way,
Makes Murray the great voice,
Booming,
Coming down from
Outback/ steppes/deserts
You hear often,*



*On lonely nights,
On the desolate highways,
Echoing loudly –
In the fevered,
Rational,
Calculating,
Profit-seeking,
Stock-exchange-fixed
Minds and hearts. (Lines 1 – 54)*

Note: In the paper, reference *GC* means *Golden Cacti*, *POH* means *Poems on Highway* and *MMM* means *Mundane My Muse*.

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