

BOOK REVIEW ON PROF. PASHUPATI JHA'S TAKING ON TOUGH TIMES BY DR. DALIP KHETARPAL

The picture of a man pondering on the cover-page of the anthology appears seemingly depressed about widespread drought due to which even the crust of the mother earth has cracked, famishing for rain, as it were. But then the lone green foliage betokening good tidings seems to suggest that hope springs eternal in the breast of man. In its wider perspective it could also mean that the all-round emotional, spiritual and moral sterility we are witnessing, varied evils and corruption we are facing or surrounded with, would disappear one day and the world could become a live-able place again. Most of the poems in the current anthology suggest how our beautiful and sacred earth has been deprived of all its spiritual and moral values that humanity cherishes, that man should formulate and imbibe. Disenchanted thus, with all-pervasive ills and evils, the poet vents the plethora of his disgruntled feelings through this anthology, enriched with his own philosophy, love, a deep sense of humanitarianism, proletarianism, optimism and undying faith in God. All these in fact, combine to form his vision and outlook of life. His vision is further crystallized by his innate virtues, humane attitude, sweet and sour life-

experiences and sound education. The very spirit of Indian culture and its ethos resides in the themes of his poems.

The ironically titled poem, 'Hats Off', (16) strongly underlines all assorted evils that are rampant in our degenerate system, manifested through false 'friends', 'myriad faces', conscienceless 'pals', evil 'politicians', 'fattening ego' of the governing 'authority', etc. The poet has firm faith in God, but on seeing Him doing nothing to rectify this topsy-turvy situation, he becomes desperate and takes his hats off to Him also 'for watching everything indifferently/and doing nothing at all.' Shifting love, is one the most abhorrent evils of the age that reduces love to a passing fad. This is explicated through 'Passing Passion' (25) that passes from one person to another every now and then and in the twinkling of an eye. But, such an attitude is often only adopted by the 'The Cloned breed' (26). In independent and democratic India every day is a 'A Sordid Day in the Jungle' (27) where justice is inconceivable and everything 'is out of sync' as human leeches who are worse than real 'blood sucking leeches,' found only in drains, have manned all important areas and points of life, like malls, offices, institutions, etc. It is only through 'compromise' that such wicked people, ironically, raise their position and status to great heights, for 'dissent' to them means, 'downfall,' 'The Magic and the Tragic'(64). In such an atmosphere the honest Cinderella poet must feel restless, uneasy and suffocated.

'Cheapened all' (18) spotlights trivialization, due to modernization of almost all high, spiritual and socio-moral values of all vital aspects of life: authority, culture, music, love, concept of man, woman, poet, facts, feelings, etc., culminating in three short, crisp, painful punch lines: 'And through it all/I have to live/and die'----an inevitable and agonizing universal plight indeed! Present times, so, are 'Tough Times' (67) with everything going haywire. But, however, the messiah poet is asked by the muse 'to retune the chaotic times...with rhythm and rhymes/and to retrieve things to proper points'. The poet then in 'My Land' (69) expresses his ardent desire to root out rampant corruption 'with sharp scissors' by 'deft hands' so that it doesn't persist and adversely affect posterity. The metaphorical comparison between 'the 'blighted' 'orchard' and the current sordid and grim scenario is apt and telling, both. He is perfectly right when in 'On the Verge of Breaking Point' (72) queries, 'What type of legacy/we are leaving behind/for our grandchildren yet to be born?' Sexual exploitation of women is elucidated with rare pathos in 'Contrasting Concerns' (20). 'Birth of a Baby' (24) expresses a deep sense of fear for a new born babe who has to be protected from the inhuman and immoral world 'full of cunning foxes'. Now, a time has arrived when even the world has become 'petrified' and can no longer bear the wrongs happening in it. Even nature, has vainly protested in the form of quakes, hurricanes, flash floods as the poet's pantheistic vision evinces in 'The World turned Small' (73). But then nothing

good, he feels could emerge in a world full of incorrigible 'High Class Hedonists' (78) callous and insensitive people promoting corruption at various levels in our society.

The worst and most pitiable victims of all pervasive corruption are the unnoticed and uncared-for poor, the down-trodden and those belonging to the lower class of the society. Partaking in their grief and anguish, the poet assumes the role of a proletariat for his desire to right the wrongs is so intense. In 'Part of the City that Seldom Sleeps,'(29) soul-stirring lines on poor neglected labors flow rapidly from the poet's pen 'busy...in serving others;/adding paltry penny to each moment/having scarcely a free moment to relax...overburdened on head/boxes dangling from his arms too---- /a hapless Hercules made to lift the globe;/rickety rickshaw pullers ply on/the shivering roads, coughing their lungs out...' though ironically, 'No epic is crafted out of them'. The poet so, compassionately and reasonably wishes that a 'small tribute 'be paid 'to their nightly struggle/ for keeping their body and soul together'. Pathetically, their suffering, emanating from excruciating toil or sex exploitation, does not end here, it passes from one hierarchy to the other as elucidated in 'Hierarchy of Suffering' (37). Further, as there is no human power to help release them from their suffering, the poet appeals to God to hear their pleas, unheard hitherto, though no precious offerings have been made by them to Him. The desperate poet then touches the most sensitive cord of

human psyche with his impassioned outburst: 'the canopy' that 'God has erected/so carefully, would be wailing with million cries/amid the victorious cacophony of marauders'----- accompanied by a strong implication that there should be instant action by Him, for justice delayed is justice denied.

In 'Love is' (60) the poet defines love subtly, comprehensively and poetically. An ideal lover as he is, he defines and stresses the selfless nature of love: 'Love is that which gives alone/expecting nothing in exchange...' Broadening the range of love and elucidating its all-pervasiveness, he affirms: 'This entire paraphernalia/of creation is grounded in love/pure simple, not guided/ by any give and take'. As a symbol of peace and calm, love is described as 'a spent force, leaving behind/only calm breathing in two bodies in one...serenity is all in love'. Love for him is also immeasurable and involves sacrifice and suffering. The idea though age-old, conventional and universal, is explicated lyrically, effectively and delineated pictorially by citing an example of a bird that risks its life and braves all 'pelted stones' and 'darting arrows while hunting/ food crumbs for her chicks', 'Measurement' (46). Imbued with infinite and intense love, the poet even fancies devising ways and means to display love: 'Why can't we wrap ourselves in the same quilt/while sleeping on the same bed...cover our bodies in the same shawl/while going out for an early morning walk?' 'What has gone wrong' (57). But then excessive love is also

psychologically and naturally accompanied by excessive sense of insecurity relating especially to losing his beloved when she dies. So, while living, he thinks of tracking her 'till the day death finally cleaves us apart', 'Apprehension of Death'(55).

The poet's portrayal of woman is realistic, sensitive, compassionate and meaningful. While poetizing woman, he always has his own mother in the foreground of his mind. He considers her as a source of his life and feels that he survives on the basis of her 'unbounded affection' mainly due to the tie of 'umbilical cord', 'She' (43). But then in 'Woman' (11) he curses his fate also, because 'while creating' him, his mother '... was a wonderful artist/giving alluring shape/to each of (his) limbs, but when/ it comes to writing his fate/your (her) ink suddenly was blotched up-----'though he very well knows that his future does not lie in the hands of his creator-mother. Aggrieved at witnessing woman exploited heartlessly by man, he queries: 'Why does he act/only as a ruthless chieftain/all the time collecting his levy?' The persistence of such exploitation has led him to view the emptiness and passivity of the civilization itself: 'Civilization has brought only cosmic change/inside it all is the same story-----' The pathetic plight of woman is also revealed in 'Death of a Young Mother' (75) which is a bitter satire on the custom of marrying under-aged girls in villages in India where early marriage and child-bearing are encouraged to 'strengthen the family tree'. But such young women often

die of malnutrition and ill health also during young age. It is such social evils that the poet wants to eradicate through his powerful pen, consciously or unconsciously, wearing the garb of social reformer, as it were.

'The Alchemy of Art' (79) depicts extreme beauty of a dancer. Her beauty, grace and skill can put a person into a trance, into a celestial world so much so that one is likely to forget the physical world. The poet describes her dance most lyrically and aesthetically, drawing its strength from the Hindu mythology: '...the daughter disciple of Nataraja, not a dancer made of flesh and blood/but the dance itself; not a figure/but a symbol, a consciousness/where beauty is transformed into sublimity, the earthly into divine----' Illustrating the dance by analogy with the dance of Hindu God, Shiva is artistically appropriate here and has religious connotations. Nataraja is the depiction of Shiva as the cosmic dancer who performs his divine dance of bliss and symbolizes the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, as well as the daily rhythm of birth and death. With such ethereal ideas in mind, any reader could fall into a trance while watching the dance of the poet's dancer. The poet's focus of attention is not confined to the external charms or beauty of a woman, his keen perception often rips open her externals to expose her internal deficiencies also. For instance, he has a megalomaniac woman in his subconsciousness in the poem, 'Strange Megalomaniac' (41) wherein he says that the mysterious, changing and complex brain of a woman cannot be mapped or analyzed.

He is at pains to see that it is her 'ego alone' and nothing else that 'counts'. She has no true relations with anybody 'or with any ideal. Her link begins and ends/absolutely with her own hubris and nothing else...'/ '...her tribe/ is increasing like infectious virus/to affect and overrun all, if/the great Goddess herself/does not intervene soon'. The poet's aversion to 'ego' here unfolds the type of man he is.

The poet becomes deeply psychological and philosophical during the course of his writing. One could, at times, witness a keen penetration in his eyes that sees everything inside out. While observing the mysterious world he finds that it is '...out of sync/at many points and places', 'Mysterious world' (30). As a matter of fact, every thinking, reasonable person would also think it in a similar vein. This very keen perception has also led him to perceive that city dwellers have nothing good about them, despite the fact they mechanically and repeatedly say 'good morning' and 'good night', as, for them 'all is ambition, within, an obsession/with oneself...engrossed in self-gratification...have endless appetite/like the all devouring dragons of the old myth'. In contrast, however, 'village folks' are true and honest; 'they shout out their anger, abuse/and affection quite openly/without any mental filters...you may read the mind fully in their faces', 'The Contrast'(31).The honest poet feels demoralized when his keen eyes see that feelings that should have been generated from the heart, originate 'feebly in the

mind/and are worded, filtered/reworded many a time...have no impact on those, who are blessed'. Even 'prayer' is 'attuned to the material gains...looks like a bargain/between the god and the follower' and so 'worship' becomes a 'business item'. So, fed up with being housed in a superficial stifling house, he longs for 'some pious soul' to rescue him 'from there', 'Muse Protest' (32). 'Paradox of Hypocrisy' (34) is shot through and through with subtle psychology. The poet can easily foresee that most actions of man are paradoxical, but appears to take on the nuance of hypocrisy, though he won't overtly declare that he is a hypocrite. However, the poet is bold, honest and frank enough to admit that he has minor pardonable traces of hypocrisy emanating from the various antithetical thoughts and feelings simmering in his sub-consciousness. He dislikes his wife 'cooking meals for him', but 'relishes the taste of her dishes'; he feels irritated to see her 'ironing his pants and shirts', but enjoys the 'crispness' of her ironed clothes; he could not appreciate her for touching his feet, but likes the way she follows conventions with 'coyness'. Above all, these little but soulful acts have weighed him down/through wedding years/to her hands, hearth and heart'. It is indeed an exquisite poem on male psychology. But then the main idea of the poet is not to highlight paradox or hypocrisy as may be commonly perceptible to the world, because his unconscious mind knows that even such minor but tender and loving stereotyped acts generate true love and

affection between two souls. The poem is aesthetically exquisite and emotionally appealing and satisfying in that the feelings of likes and dislikes when experienced simultaneously become a source of strange bliss. And here, the two are so artistically wedded that their differences melt to form one single homogeneous whole in human psyche.

An intensely philosophical and psychological poem, 'The last Hope' (36) explicates how one loses one's love and even longing '...in the apathy/of advancing years' in life. One only then have to cling to one's memories and strongly hopes 'for rebirth and re-experience' 'like the lone ripe mango/hanging still at the end of summer'---an apt simile. When one reaches old age and death seems nigh, one tends to philosophize on issues of life and death, but a poet like Jha would like to poetize his philosophy lyrically in a state as such. In 'Obituary' (74), when 'the effect of age/is showing on' his 'limbs' the poet, like a visionary, could 'pre-hear/the wailing tears in those eyes/which were once' his own kith and kin. His ability to see the depressive current social set-up in its true colors shows his potentials to see everything happening on this earth vividly. In 'The Only Expertise' (45) he sees everyone wearing a mask and so pertinently queries: 'who dons this mask?' Many layers of masks make a man 'chameleon like', changing colors/to suit any occasion and;/ finally the white one/all dead and lifeless'. The poet sounds quite reasonable when he wonders whether it is the family that

shaped the 'mindset' or his family 'which zeroed on him/or me who dittoed their choice/or the age, expert only in masking?' It is precisely because of donning mask that man has become faceless and now the same faceless generation ironically claims that it is facing identity crisis. But the poet's vision is sharp enough to peel off the mask and render any such unfounded crisis redundant. In 'Stark Reality' (59) he lightly mocks at the faceless generation in a way that makes seriousness and frivolity walk hand in hand: 'And yet they say/there is identity crisis/in the faceless generation/brought up on lollipop and fast food'.

Thus, the poet sees that the overall scenario is dark and dismal and becomes somewhat philosophical thereon through his lyrical outpourings. He also knows that poetry has poor readership, but then he is optimistic enough to confine himself only to few genuine readers for 'Mounds of coal-heaps pale into insignificance/before a small piece of diamond'. However, he is sure that his readers who are true lovers of poetry, will one day enable him to 'win the earth/back to its pristine glory', 'Poetry Speaks' (76). Hope so, springs eternal in the poet's breast. Likewise, his optimistic ideas are reflected in many poems. In 'Bury the Hatchet' (22), he says: 'Storm can only upset things', but there is also a slow breeze to cool 'our mind and spirit'. Further, for him, geographical 'Boundary is a mere line on the map' which cannot 'divide between nationalities/and their mind and soul'. Establishing the strength and tenacity of his faith, insight and optimism in 'Needling',

(53) he says that he may feel hurt if he is needled at wrong places which are soft and weak, but one would fail to hurt him if he needles his faith, insight and strong optimism. At times, the poet even rises to the level of Browning's optimism when he says, ' a bright sunrise would energize all/without the consideration of caste, class, and creed/to usher them all into a new way of life/with hope and zest writ all around' (33).

On the whole the poems in the current volume vividly reflect Jha's psyche-----a psyche battered and somewhat rattled by hostile conditions, but still has the grit and tenacity to retain its sanctity, simplicity, pristine glory and immaculate freshness. The poet, being a down-to-earth realist, there are no flights of fancy, no myth-making or any far- fetched allusions in his anthology. He sees the world around him objectively and realistically as it exists, with great compassion, love, sympathy and mental and emotional involvement and that is why he finds that times are tough to take on, especially when everything around us is dark and gloomy, when corruption holds the sway over all that is good and when there is all-pervasive spiritual and moral bankruptcy. But for the poet who is also a mature senior Professor of English at I. I. T. Roorkee, it was not difficult to tide over all these through his strong sense of optimism, firm faith in God, humane approach and positive thinking that could finally convert tough times into something bearable and comfortable. The volume also brings randomly gut-wrenching, but

inspiring and soul-stirring ideas and thoughts for the readers to reflect, ponder and introspect, alluding surely to another landmark achievement of the poet.

Author's Bio

Dr Pashupati Jha has a teaching experience of more than 27 years in various capacities with different colleges and universities in India. He was won several awards as an academician and has credit of getting published several papers in various journals. He has been a Vice Chairman with Indian Association for English Studies among others.

Critique's Bio

Dr Dalip Khetarpal worked as a Lecturer in English at Manchanda Delhi Public College, Delhi. He worked in various capacities, as Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and H .O. D (English) in various academic institutes in Haryana. He was a Dy. Registrar and Joint Director at the Directorate of Technical Education, Haryana, Chandigarh.

Dr Dalip has also started a new genre in the field of poetry, which he would like to call "psycho-psychic flints".



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