

**THE INTERFACE OF THE MYTH OF CONCERN AND REALITY: A
STUDY OF CHARUSHEEL SINGH'S *TERRACOTTA FLAMES*,
SCRIPTURE ON STONE AND *ETCHING ON THE EDGE***

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Abstract

English poetry in India has reached a composite level from where one can relate to the variety of sub-genres of poetry dealing with a variety of themes and issues. However, a credible connect to our rich Vedic civilization in relation to the world civilization had been missing for a long time. Undoubtedly Rabindra Nath Thakur and Sri Aurobindo brought forth this convention to the poetry readers, but in contemporary times, Charu Sheel Singh is doing the same with his ambitiously epic as well as crisp lyrical volumes of poetry. His collections of poems such as Songs of Life and Death, The Creation Cocktail, Terracotta Flames, Scripture on Stone and Etching on the Edge, Kashi, etc have tremendous amount of cultural energy and deliberation on the Indian as well as world civilization. The present paper efforts to bring out the essence of his three volumes of poetry. There is a strong connect from historicity to contemporaneity in his treatment of themes at various levels.

Keywords: myth of concern, naad-tatwa, subliminal, cacophonous jazz, mystic, existentiality, Ravidas, Shabari, Eklavya, Yadu, Dronacharya, philosophy, low mimetic, high-mimetic, nativized

The poetry of Charu Sheel Singh adheres to 'the myth of concern'. He evaluates the contemporary scenario under the canons of India's glorious past. There is a continuous yearning, in his poetry, to achieve the lost horizon of our insurmountable knowledge of the Vedas, Aranyakas, and Puranas. The poet achieves a unique sense of primitivism and contemporaneity through the use of epic metaphors on the modern scenario. His tropes are conditioned in eternal Indian philosophy and culture. One is awestruck at the range of his perceptions and their application to issues of human concern. This is particularly true of his epic narratives of *Terracotta Flames*, *Scripture on Stone* and *Etching on the Edge*

Reading *Terracotta Flames*ⁱ is, in fact, not understanding it at once. It requires a sense of distance from the usual readings of literature, especially such literatures where the common

motives and themes are too realistic and temporal to warrant any extraordinary approach. Therefore, an ‘empty’ reading of these poems is as good as reading a universal philosophy with least philosophical mind; or debating a *raga sangeet* without understanding the ‘*naad-tatwa*’. The poems in the collection are poems in meditation unleashing strong radiographs and transmitting the physical and metaphysical realities of the universe. The poems simply do not involve verse rhetoric on some crude idea and event, rather they weave in thoughts together recurring in a thoughtful discourse on human existence in a metaphysically perceived and celestially governed universe.

His poetry sets perspectives of our action from past to present and establishes how irreversibly permanent our passions of the past may look in our miseries of the present. The so called heroes of the past in their mad pursuit of ‘romance’ and ‘glory’ (of what Bernard Shaw meant in *Arms and the Man*- “that the world is really a glorious world for women who can see its glory and men who can act its romance!” might have benefited their kinds by wealth and glory but their atrocities inflicted upon the oppressed are yet bursting through the vanquished monuments. He aptly describes: ‘A swollen house/ Empty though, struggling/ Under the debris/ Of history inhabits/ Poor people – cultured// yet exiled’. (III, p.1). (All references to the poem now onwards from the same source).

There are fifty one poems in the collection cherishing and lamenting invariably the lost glory of mankind. The poems view life and death as permanent values and not as simply pleasure and pain. Buddha seems to be internally present as a lighthouse in the poems. Life with aroused senses is one that Buddha lived, and life entrapped in *trishna* is one that Buddha preached against. The poet, too, functions as a Buddhist philosopher meditating over the diseased past and present: ‘textual traditions go / down memory lane/ inscribing hymns of glory/ upon platforms of Disease’ (I, p.1)

In fact the first poem is a prologue to what other poems in the collection iterate. The poems are a shocking realization to those pretenders of contemporary history, who view modern history as the full bloomed lotus on the dirty platforms of ancestral mud. They forget that their ‘military might’, which seized the ‘Towers of Infinity’, has itself become prisoner under its own ‘owling conscience (I, p.1). Such pretenders can only hoot and hoot but never sing.

The undercurrent contrast in all the poems is that between the holy conscience reflecting the terracotta flames and the external tempting environment, which maligns these reflections. The tempting world of Satan chooses the human body and soul as the easy conductors for trespassing the lighthouse of the holy conscience. Human beings are charged with this malignity of the soul: ‘Are we pumpkins/ of disease encroaching/ upon conscience without/ adequate fees?’ (XI, p.11).

The world of disabled images is masquerading before the awakened mind: ‘Vituperative images/ clink and cluster round/ wheels that ferret/ round instinctual paradigms/ into the subliminal/ naught of disease’ (V, p.5). The poet’s anguish is not without the hope of redress. He invokes the glorious past to shape the present: ‘Rise O mortals/ beyond your coffin/ selves to inaugurate/ yesterdays into sanguine/ tomorrows of love./ Let the sea-shells sing/ choral hymns like/ the eternal dove’ (XVIII, p18). The poet discredits the apodictic concept of culture which is informed by any one orthodox idea and belief rather he believes that ‘It is a difference/ between the raw &/ cooked that/ malleates itself, shapes/ and sides in bi-polarity/ of figures who/ put on the garb/ of clownish landscape/ on the surface of/ articulated seasons’ (XXIV, p24). The cited lines , further, show poet’s hold on various schools such as anthropological, structural and the deconstructive which are involved in defining culture.

The poems reflect the wide-ranging imagination of the poet enveloping the water, earth, and air. Further these worlds are not perceived in isolation with human existence. The mutual dialogue between the two recurs continually. Perhaps these resources seem to mock the ravings of human beings: ‘Why dig these hills/ when mountains would/ better unearth secrets/ that only a tiny bird’s/ song can tell’ (XXVII, p27). The agony of the poet’s concern of being a part of this civilization is reflected throughout the poem. The poet’s main agony is expressed against the hollowness of modern civilization, which is raking with its cacophonous jazz beats the richness of it.

Now the thing is who has the authority to decide that our past was all sorrow of human beastliness, a dark cage in which humanity was cruelly crushed by the oppressors? Certainly they should not be the substandard hypocrites who themselves are oppressing the society with their bankruptcy of thought. Our past despite its deficiency stored those values, which we look back to in our moments of woe. The poet iterates it: “Numerous roads/ shirk like minarets/ brought down the/ cringing memory-lanes/ of a by-gone era/ creating caverns that/ forsake mystic zones/ of identity one/ thought one’s own”. The poet further says: ‘Lucid times are/ gone marshalling into/ units of discord/ distorted and broken/ into pieces unmalleable./ Yet time’s surrogates/ are in like marauding/ sharks who envelop/ dark through cozy/ corners of human/ conscience’ (V, p.5).

The stylistic structure of the poems is rich to figure out the serious concern of the poet. The words and skillfully evolved phrases come to be as the ideographs of the poet’s reflections. The poems bring out the wide-ranging imagination of the poet, which crosses the myopic ideals of any one civilization, culture, or religion. He believes, like Blake, that all religions are essentially one, and all natural forms provide archetypes, which inform uniformly in all cultures the personal and social behaviour of man. Further, the poet takes a holistic approach in which the microcosmic and macrocosmic equally affect each other. The poems involve rich metaphors and extended similes ranging from the most ironic objectives to the most anagogic one, though the extensive mythology and realism sometimes disquiet the intelligibility of the mind. But the poems are undoubtedly resourceful in informing the myths of concern of Indian culture in particular and universal culture in general.

*Scripture on Stone*ⁱⁱ is one more worthy addition to the line of mystic poetry of the Indian Writing in English with a difference. Other mystic poems such as those of Aurobindo and Tagore have brought out the ecstasy of mysticism per se whereas Charusheel’s poetry creates mysticism amidst the cacophonous materiality of the world. There is a clear battle of inter-penetration of the divine and the mundane in his poems under review. The volume has ten narrative poems on prototypical characters of class representation. They are Ram, Ravidas, Shabari, Eklavya, Taj Mahal, Gandhi- A Script & A Scroll, Meera, Buddha, Kabir, and Ganga. In all these the poet projects the nonlinear line of action. They individually and together frame a saga of civilization spread over from mythic to the ironic. There is a clear disillusionment in all these characters on what they wanted to achieve and what they were compelled to achieve but even the circumstantial hazards failed to deviate them from what they intended to achieve. The ongoing narrative establishes that nothing is indispensable in this world.

The poems interpret the functional roadblocks of the macrocosmic characters in the earthen existentiality of mundane human life. Rama needed to be born because the universe wanted him so: ‘the temporal/ satiety made him breed/ effigies of ideas that/ could never bear a fruit/on the tattered coat of humanity/that shrouded us all (P21)’. (All references to the poem now onwards from the same source).The poems bear a plaintive rhythm of loss and gain in a rhetoric, which is classic and yet modern. The poet anxiously awaits the arrival of those

kingfishers who could fish out humanity from the octo-weeds of evils. The basic question posed by the poet is that of evading and escalating self from merging into the greater Self. The undertone of the Gita of distancing the self while being in the shell is prevalent everywhere in the poems.

The poet also bears a message that the powers of darkness pose a threat to the powers of sustenance however a transitory one. The powers of sustenance should not bother to explain why this is this and that is that. History just records the subtle diversions but does not explain - why? The explanation is largely universally known to the mystical minds only: 'it was/ Chetanand who put on the/ garments of Ravidas- a Yadu rishi/ known as cobbler for reasons/ history would not explain' (P25). By choosing ideational characters the poet incorporates the entire making of that character. That Ravidas is a Yadu is aptly explained in the poem.

The imagery is intersecting the divine with the temporal to give a temporal and modern touch: 'Drona became a burning ball as if a sub-divisional clerk getting off/ his duty in anger' (P24). While reading these poems one feels the same natural rhythm of raga music. The poet has the power of automatically arresting the rhythm of thought in apt phraseology. The poem collectively exhorts a high-mimetic way of life against a low-mimetic frustration (P66), as seen by Dronacharya. The poems certainly have a strange force of arresting the mind and transport the reader to the deeper realities of the subjects. They are a must read to the readers of taste. Lacuna if any is that of their being extremely serious and therefore the shallow taste of the popular reader may find them difficult to understand and digest.

The poems *Etching on the Edge*ⁱⁱⁱ carry on identical theme(s) akin to Charu Sheel Singh's poetry: that is echoing the universal mythic and mystic emblems in the tattered channels of contemporary society. There are a total of 32 poems on a variety of classical/ mythical characters and events- such as Savitri, Ravan, Sita, Yayati, Renunciation, Next Millennium etc.

In fact reading these poems will certainly present a unitary impression of the mystical themes Charu Sheel carries in his narrative poems. The volume starts with a narrative poem on "Baba Neemkarori" with a brave description on the life of Baba who, having extraordinary power and elegance, lived a miraculous life of simplicity and benevolence. Baba as seer and philosopher is shown far ahead than other thinkers: 'Descartes and Plato are shadows falling/ short of Revelation Baba's/ equinoxial figure...'. Poems like 'Savitri' and 'Rani' (the later a churlish rural girl) bear irony in terms of paradigmatic and syntagmatic connotations of their action and achievement in modern contexts. Savitri finds her flattered and luxurious in the contemporary society deviated from the consummate devotion to her companion: 'Satyavans are stolen monuments and/ Savitris sparrows of beaming gold'. Whereas Rani fears going to city as she fears city will make her woman there. That city has vicious traps to menacingly converting one in root haters is reflected in 'My Village'. The poem 'Saga of a Culprit' is a fascinating poem on the degenerated activities of the progenies of Adam and Eve. The poem beautifully makes use of the modern images. Dr Binod Mishra rightly notes, "Through his poetry his imagination plays on the mythological characters whose actions require careful exploration".^{iv}

So far as the style of his writing is concerned, the poet has spontaneously blended the mythic and the modern. His rhetoric shares an identical platform with TS Eliot. The poems have elegance in presentation and persuasion in effect. However, even this volume is oriented towards the thoughtful classical readers, the casual readers may find the serious and idiomatic diction hard to comprehend. Noted critic OP Budholia notes "Charu Sheel does not make use of low mimetic devices such as irony and satire that uphold a distopoeic vision; on the contrary, his

treatment remains high-mimetic and the ironies that are there, do not end to banal ends but renovate in a certain sagacity of experience.”^v

Language is the product of perceptions. The way one perceives the same way one writes. The perceptions of some serious idea can never be expressed in a profane syntax, and if so, it will turn farcical. The best gain of the poetry of Charusheel Singh is its seamless spontaneity of expression of the implausible locale and scale because of high-past genesis to the plausible comprehension in the contemporary context. He has struck a balance between the classical and modern. It may be inconvenient to be extraordinarily rhetorical on the very commonplace issues and that has been amply taken care of by the poet. R. Parthasarathy writes: “There is a conflict between language as a simple communication and man’s desire for ever greater expressiveness-- a conflict between informing on the one hand, on the other, trying through language to put something new or personal in the world, to use words in unaccustomed ways.”^{vi} This is particularly true of the modern Indian poets writing in English these days. They have successfully nativized English to express the local and homogenous issues. Charu Sheel Singh obviously leads the way.

Works Cited

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ⁱⁱ Singh, Charu Sheel. *Scripture on Stone* (New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2007).

ⁱⁱⁱ Singh, Charu Sheel. *Etching on the Edge* (New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2007).

^{iv} Mishra Binod “Echoes of Spiritualism in the Poetry of Charu Sheel Singh” in *Twentieth-Century and Contemporary Poetry*, 2003, (https://www.academia.edu/44300010/Echoes_of_Spiritualism_Charusheel_Singh).

^v Budholia OP. *Charu Sheel Singh Collected Poems (1975-2003)*, (New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers and Distributors, 2008).

^{vi} Parthasarathy R. *Ten Twentieth Century Indian Poets*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.