

Book Review on Dr Dalip Khetarpal's *Ripping into Consciousness* by Dr O P Arora

Dr Dalip Khetarpal is a luminary of contemporary Indian English Literature. He is an excellent poet and an insightful critic, a great academician and an eminent scholar. *Ripping into Consciousness* is Dr Khetarpal's second collection of poems which attempts at exploring and exposing the social, cultural and psychic contradictions that exist in the Indian society. His penetrating vision can go deep down the layers of covers that have always tried to hide the dark reality. Thus the poet, like a prophet, unfolds the mysteries of our living a fake life, and enlightens the reader and awakens his consciousness in relation to various problems infesting the Indian society. Intensity of feeling in these poems makes them moving and soul-stirring, and the reader is inspired to look at the world in a different way. He is delighted to share the vision of the poet and swim in the currents and cross-currents of the flow of these poems.

The beautiful cover design of the book is symbolic and very meaningful. It shows the evolutionary process of man from a chimp to a man standing tall on the snowy peaks. But has he really evolved? Dr Khetarpal moves with man and examines him from all angles in his different poems, looks deep into his consciousness, and finds, to his great dismay that he is hollow within. Physically he may have evolved into a giant who has the guts to say that he has conquered nature, but in fact, he has shamed nature. He has completely failed to evolve morally, spiritually and humanely. His moral depravity, spiritual bankruptcy and barbaric ways have turned him into a mere grabber. In fact, he has looted Nature too and created all sorts of imbalances. If you care to look into his consciousness, without being blinded by the traditional forms and frills, you will easily find that he has miserably failed to measure up to the canons of being even a human being. He is, in fact, worse than a beast. He is more beastly than even the most ferocious beast.

Poetry is life. If poetry does not reflect life around the poet, it becomes fanciful and serves no purpose. 'Art for art sake' may give satisfaction to the poet personally and he may create another world outside the real world, but that is not the world we live in. Dr Khetarpal's world is the real world, our world, and we read his poems because they reflect our problems, realistically, poignantly, and bring out the inherent flaws in our nature, our thought-process, and enlighten us about how we miserably fall short of our own expectations. The gap between what we are and what we should be is so gaping that the reader is bewildered and is forced to look within. Dr Khetarpal has the extraordinary ability to analytically examine man's inner self and bring to the surface his real self by tearing away his façade. The masked man is unmasked and he stands completely naked, unable to hide himself from the piercing eyes of the poet. He is "a choked volcano" and unrelentingly unleashes his energetic "abrupt thick trail / Of fiery embers and lava" in the form of "choked feelings and thoughts." (1) The "intensity and sublimity" of the poet's thoughts mesmerize the readers and they are awakened to the reality which might not have been possible had it not been so.

In the poem, 'Slashed Journey of Pitiably Truth', the poet bemoans that truth is the first casualty in this hypocritical society. 'Satyamev Jayte' is the most ludicrous and theatrical slogan because truth is inconceivable and never wins here. As "all thoughts and feelings emanate / From the matrix of lies", truth "has to die / The most unnatural, untimely death..." because the society is infested with "inhuman humans." (5) He, therefore, calls upon people:

Garner guts, be bold and true

And hold to the truth

To feed the hungering soul (6)

We only care for the material gains and starve our souls through falsehood, deceit and hypocrisy.

Masked man is the ruling norm in our society where all wear layers of masks, one upon the other, and it would be impossible to unmask any man. And “if mask is stripped / There could be death.” (7) So essential these masks have become even for survival that sometimes intimate people seem “intimate strangers” while strangers appear as “intimate friends”. All human relations, therefore, have lost their meaning in this emotionally-starved and deceitful society. The poet too has become indifferent to all emotions:

*Love and hate, so,
Affect me not,
Camouflage sex and kiss
Give no sensation,
A stroke or caress is nothing
But a brush past
Over my insensate skin (9)
Into which warm waves
And vibrations of feeling
Flow not.*

Thus a sensitive man has been turned into a stone. The poet, therefore, concludes in ‘Can Man Ever Remain a Man?’ that in this mechanized society where man’s psyche is hooked up to “the social key-board”, he can never retain his spontaneity and true feelings. He bewails that

Mankind that should be

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*infinitely complex
And unfathomable
Has lost all his glory and aura of mystery.
Bereft thus, of true human attributes,
Can man ever remain
A real man? (12)*

'Some Dark Shades in Bureaucracy' is a very powerful poem that attacks and satirizes the Indian bureaucracy which, in league with the political class, has blatantly used its "insatiable hunger" for power and greed to deprive the common man of his legitimate rights. In fact, the bureaucracy is primarily responsible, according to the poet, for degrading the entire system of governance because these officials are "Resourceful, dehumanized, ailing, intelligent." (25)

In 'The Power and Grit of Woman' Dr Khetarpal expresses the obvious fact that woman enjoys immense power over man because he is rendered weak by his libido. She knows his weakness so well and exploits it to the maximum, and "She feels triumphant / To see him shamefully degraded." (27) And poor man! He feels ecstatic even when he falls:

*As Adam felt ecstatic
In falling with Eve...
man when naively obsessed,
Always feels ecstatic
In such a fall. (27)*

The tragedy of man-woman relationship is heightened when even a wise man becomes a victim of a foolish woman because his love "flares into sex."

Continuing his theme of frustration in love in 'How Can I Possess You', the poet is bewildered to find that love which is supreme and "surmounts and defeats all odds" becomes the cause of

*Muzzling self-esteem, sacrifice
Devotion, dedication, truth,
And even all supreme divine values! (30)*

It happens when man gets blind and deifies a worthless woman. As he is a true lover, he can neither leave her nor accept her superciliousness. Love kills you when you glorify an undeserving object. Love then becomes a curse, a trap for you. 'Painful Reticence' reaffirms the poet's view that "Woman defeats man / With her

simple indifference.” (34) The lover who wants response from the beloved but gets studied silence instead is tortured because “He can bear all tribulations on earth, / But not the torments of woman’s silence / Or her sphinxy looks.”(34)

Of course, it is not all dark. ‘The Paradox of Love and Sex’ presents a more pleasant picture of woman. A devoted woman, “even though unquenched / is still too forgiving.” (38) and is ready to accommodate him for his failure in sex-act where he is supposed to perform. ‘How Void Sometimes Assumes Form!’ is a beautiful love poem which attempts at unfolding the mystery of the process of love: How you are attracted towards the other person, why you choose or love a particular person over others and

*...give each other faith, love,
Commitment, sacrifice, pleasure, ecstasy,
Comfort and peace...
...incredibly, lifelong. (43)*

‘The Second Coming — Ravana’s Rational Perception’ is one of the most iconoclastic poems on our “institutionalized religion”. Man has degenerated to the level that the faces of our revered deities are printed on tobacco wraps, clothing, ‘bidi’ packs or vitality pills:

*Pitiable and shameful
That the names and images of Gods
Are used
Not as models of sublime ideals
But as a marketing strategy, (56)*

Ravana, the symbol of evil in Indian culture, revisits the earth and is horrified to see far more wicked and vicious monsters than he ever was masquerading as innocent saviors of the human race:

*Dexterous kidnappers
Ravenous rapists, killers, criminals,*

*Cheats and tricksters
Waltzing nude
Across the floors of sin,
Strangely with semblance innocent
But still were blindly, deeply loved and revered
By the fallen humans. (50)*

In comparison to these vicious rapists and killers Ravana finds that he had almost been a saint. Sita lived in his confinement for a long time, and yet was unscathed while in today's India "a kidnapped woman / is badly scathed / in the blink of an eye." (51) And yet Sita had to undergo that "stupid test, 'Agni Pariksha' which was most irrational and was forced on Sita because she was a woman. Even the heavenly societies propagated the patriarchal character and expected "silence, obedience, submissiveness / And tolerance of a woman." Ravana then

*... simply jeered
At the senseless, rotten, heavenly culture,
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Ram's naivety, his lack of identity, wisdom, insight
And sense of justice. (54)*

He is shocked to observe that in the changed scenario "sinners were winners" and instead of burning his effigies

*Why should not those living
(Not their effigies)
Be burnt on 'Dussehra' festival,
Especially, when they are beyond redemption
Or even contrition? (57)*

Like every sensitive man, the poet too cannot hide his bitterness when he finds evil defeating goodness out-rightly, without any scope of redemption whatsoever. Goodness watches meekly, hopelessly, helplessly, unable even to raise a finger.

Even the greatest intellectuals submit and surrender without a whimper. He, therefore cries out:

Christ...

Shed infinite blood,

.....

... salvaging nothing.

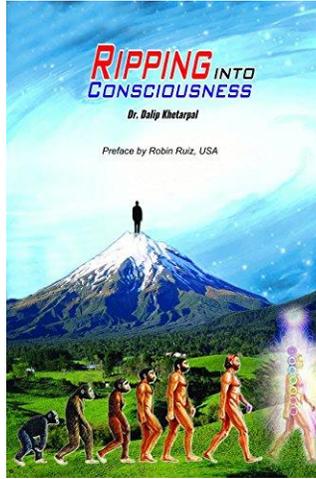
The virtuous also today

Salvage nothing. (61)

He only sees emptiness and nothingness overshadowing the heart and the soul of man, and savagery ruling all around. Life has become simply absurd, and there is no light even beyond the tunnel. It is natural for the poet, in the light of his traumatic experiences with evil, to question the existence, influence and power of God. How could He, if He is the creator and organizer of the universe, allow it to go into the hands of barbaric, savage thugs who have made life a hell for those who seek spiritual enlightenment and divinity. The question has always tormented every rational person but the answer has never satisfied the seeker. Mystery shrouds the reality and we live on in illusion or delusion.

Iconoclastic, rational and hard-hitting like Bernard Shaw, exposing human hollowness like T. S. Eliot in a simple but lucid style like that of Whitman, Dr Khetarpal has penned some wonderful and meaningful poems in this beautiful collection. These poems will certainly inspire the reader and are bound to enlarge and enrich his vision; posterity will also surely reap its fruits.

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Author'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'.

Critique's Bio

Dr O.P. Arora is a well-known poet, novelist and short story writer and holds a distinctive place among contemporary Indian writers in English. Arora has a Doctorate in English Literature from Punjab University, Chandigarh and has taught in Delhi University for over three decades.

His poems have been published in many leading literary journals, magazines and dailies and have been generously included in the prominent anthologies. He has four poetry anthologies *The Creeping Shadows*, *Embers in the Ashes*, *The Edge of the Cliff*, and *Pebbles on the Shore* to his credit.

His last novel *The Silken Traps* has been critically acclaimed as a true portrayal of contemporary Indian social scene and a great work looking at human relations in a novel way.



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