

DR O. P. ARORA REVIEWS DR DALIP KHETARPAL'S *FATHOMING INFINITY*

Fathoming Infinity is melody of intellectual Churning

Dr Dalip Khetarpal enjoys a pre-eminent position as a poet and critic in today's Indian English literary world. His poetry is thoughtful, thought-provoking and hard-hitting. Through his forceful and logical arguments he opens your mental eyes to the new ways of looking at the traditional thought-process. Like T. S. Eliot he is a realist to the core and ruthlessly shatters all your rotten traditional beliefs. Iconoclastic like George Bernard Shaw he declares: No illusions please, nor lusions. He, step by step, line by line, proves logically, giving unrelenting arguments, that what you believed in till now was simply humbug. Dr Khetarpal is a sensitive soul and looks at things afresh with an open mind. He knows you will be shocked initially because you have been trained to perceive everything with a closed mind, windows and doors shut. Not your fault. That suits the vested interests, the so-called guardians of the society. But the poet is a rebel. He demolishes and dismantles your long-held sacred beliefs and mercilessly shakes the moth-eaten foundations on which you had built those illusions. Reality is very bitter. It is difficult to digest. But once you awaken to the reality, it is nigh impossible to stick to those worn-out concepts. Poems in this collection are marvellous, dealing with different themes and ideas. God's plenty. It is not fanciful imagination here, it is a hard knock at

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

psychology, philosophy, biology, sociology and metaphysics. The poet, in these 'psycho-psychic poems', peeps deep into your soul and the clutches which shackle it. He storms your brain and you gradually realize the truth, and with awe whisper to yourself: How true! The reader of these poems will at the end be an awakened soul, there is no doubt about it. And with the horizons of his mind and consciousness widening to encompass new ideas, he will no doubt affirm that the poet is in fact a prophet.

The title of the collection too is enigmatic. Is it humanly possible to fathom infinity? The poet himself accepts in his poem 'Speech Cuffs':

While thoughts

Ideas and feelings

Are infinite,

Words are finite.

But can the finite

Cope with the infinite? (20)

And yet Dr Khetarpal takes up the cudgels: he attempts at touching almost all the subjects under the sun and goes deepest into the deep sea to explore the truth. Truth is his mission, howsoever difficult and complex the path might be.

'Individuality' is a dominant thrust of the poet in many of the prominent poems in this collection. Individual vs society has been the recurrent theme in the works of all great writers. The society likes to have only conformists, servile and obedient nonentities to serve its purpose. Despite the rigid and rugged curtains, since times immemorial, individuals have always risen against the society to break its back, shatter its foundations and enlighten the coming generations. That serves the evolutionary

purpose of Nature too. This fight has always gone on, and the victory or defeat of the individual depends on the perception only. It is a see-saw game and ultimately it is the individuals who win even if they face temporary setbacks. In social terms such an individual may be a “big unique zero” but it is he who becomes the driving force of the coming generations. Great men like Jesus, Gandhi, King, Saint Joan, Mandela and many others like them are never accepted by the society because they pose a threat to the entrenched system. But such individuals do not care for consequences—they are ready to face death too. However they cannot accept to exist as de-individuated men, carrying on like scarecrows, ultimately discovering their own emptiness. (4)

In ‘Loss of Identity’, the poet uses the metaphor of the cloud which sometimes “breaks, / Losing its form compact, / Its true identity” when driven by “strong gush / Of winds.” The poet sadly bemoans the loss of the cloud’s identity and wishes:

*If only the cloud
Could protect and withstand
Its true identity and retain
Its power to resist...(6)*

Sad but true. Most of the people in the world become weak and compromise with the powers that be, lose their “power to resist”, and cease to have any individuality of their own. They just become cogs in the social machine or become ‘His Master’s Voice’.

‘Identification Syndrome’ presents a piquant situation wherein the identity by name or surname relates you to a particular religion and culture, community or race. This immediately brings in all the prejudices and biases identified with such religion or culture and creates a chaotic situation because one

... frantically and mindlessly

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

*Accepts his brethren,
As he rejects those
Of distinct brethren. (8)*

The myopic selection and rejection is extremely harmful for your proper understanding of the human mind. But the poet says there is no escape because without name or surname

*One becomes unidentifiable,
Making all human affairs
And dealings
Again chaotic
And run amok. (9)*

Human predicament of identity!

Individual pitted against the society. Willy-nilly you are a part of certain social set-up, at its bottom lies the family which, in today's world, is facing the biggest crisis. 'Psycho-Social Crises' raises this very pertinent question in relation to the 'identity crisis'. The poet has shown how different phases of life generate different feelings in the individual psyche and how the unanswered doubts and uncertainties add up to the psychological stresses and pressures in the individual. These stressed individuals, what shape they take, how they act and react, all these become psychic disorders which play havoc with the human race and the creative process. The poet sadly asks: In "a dysfunctional / Social and family structure" (12)

*...should a man
Be destined for such calamitous stressors,
Sans a fault of his own? (13)*

This painful question perturbs every sensitive individual whose aspirations as an individual have been negated by the stupid

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

family and social taboos. Mental disorders or perversions may be the natural outcome. Widespread violence in the world, sadistic and masochistic tendencies so commonly seen in the society and manias of various forms can easily be traced to the psychic disorders caused by these doubts and stresses.

Skepticism keeps the seeker alive while faith or blind faith rings the death-knell of the mind. All your gurus, religious priests or tradition-guardians want you to be dead so that they could rule unhindered over 'walking corpses'. Man without a thinking mind is nothing but a 'walking corpse'. In this world

*... nothing is absolute
Nothing unquestionable,
Nothing certain,
Nothing complete,
And nothing perfect,
Including perhaps
Even mythical Gods
Created by human faith. (16)*

There is nothing final in this world. Finality can never be reached by anyone. There is no final truth, even about Nature or God. All the subjects of knowledge too are always in the process of growth. Nobody, therefore, has a right to make the final judgement about anything. Even the best of the researchers too should leave scope for the future skeptics. 'The Dynamism of Skepticism' raises man to the level of an eternal seeker, unbound, unlimited. The poet wants that the chastity of the seeker should be maintained at all costs, and nobody should be allowed to pollute it if the human race is to evolve to a higher level.

'Implosion / Explosion' is a very touching poem that warns against the tendency of the society to ignore the anguish and

agony of the sensitive individuals. The society lives, unfortunately, at the animal level where we value only the body and everything that happens to the body at the conscious level. We are aware of the bombs that explode outside, but what about the bombs that explode inside the mind and soul of the sensitive individuals? In fact

*... the inward groan
And excruciating pangs
Of the writhing humanity
must be sympathetically addressed to
... save it
From its impending
Cataclysmic end. (25)*

Even those who suffer within because of the unjust social order pose a danger to the human race. You, in your arrogance, cannot ignore the simmering discontent of the helpless people. Who knows they may rise in revolt some day? History is replete with numerous such examples.

Rousseau, one of the greatest champions of individual liberty, stated in no uncertain terms that man is born free but is everywhere in chains or that the child is born innocent but is corrupted by the society. ‘Masked / Unmasked’ is a very profound poem that corroborates Rousseau in every possible way. Dr Khetarpal has very artistically woven pathology, psychology and sociology into this very meaningful poem. It indicts the society for doing everything in turning the innocent individual self into the masked social self. The child, innocently and “unconsciously stumbles into / A tangled social web,” and to “facilitate his survival / And smoothen his existence / He, with some reluctance / Dons a mask.” (83) There begins his despicable journey of wearing masks, different for different

occasions or different people. Initially reluctantly, later willingly. Gradually “the mask is fused / With the face” till “ the man becomes the mask / Or the mask, man.” (84) In a society where masked man is a norm, the condition of a maskless man is “pathetically pathological” as he is an alienated person and is only an outsider. Of course, his non-conformity or his individuation leads to a unique individuality which, in many ways, is good for himself and the human race. It is only the non-conformists who, despite their isolation, take the human race ahead. Poets, most of them, fall in this category. Plato had known it long back and therefore had ousted them from his ideal Republic.

‘Man and Milieu’ once again raises the pertinent question of the social forces pitted against the individual’s objectives and aspirations. Of course both individual and the society should work together for the harmonious growth of the social order, progress and evolution. But the society is insensitive to the gifted and unique individuals who want to take the society to new heights. Most of the social forces are conservative and crush such individuals. The struggle, therefore , is inevitable. The collision becomes a painful curse for the individual’s identity. In such societies

*Ironically, blessed are those
Whose self-effacing drives,
Seeking peace
Are in accord with milieu
And doomed are those
Whose evolutionary dynamics
Preserving identity
Are in discord with milieu. (58)*

What should man do? Be a wax statue or a cardboard figure? Men who think independently and reject the worn-out customs and conventions of the traditional society are bound to raise the banner of revolt, whatever be the cost.

‘Beliefs and Faiths’, the opening poem in this anthology, sets out one of the prominent themes in this collection. Most of the people, the poet observes, acquire beliefs and faiths without much thought, in fact most of them are born into them. The poet thinks that man should rationally analyze before acquiring any faith but most of the faiths are based on ‘blind faith’, and hence they cannot survive the “onslaughts of analysis”. Skeptics too, the poet asserts, feed their children with certain basic tenets to become moral individuals or waver in their skepticism when faced with desperate situations. Man is a very weak vessel. Thus, despite all the advance in scientific thinking and questioning of the illogical beliefs,

Faith stands tall

Irrevocable and unvanquished

That knows no fall. (2)

But the “spirit of science” does shake their faith at times and they are torn between belief and disbelief leading to some sort of “psychic trauma” which is a very tormenting situation. For living a sane and happy life, man must strike a balance between belief and disbelief by “imbibing the best / From both”. (3) But this is impossible. Ideal remains only in imagination, and is simply unattainable. Man, therefore, mostly vacillates, and is unable to resolve the dilemma.

Conflict is universal, and “a dominant life’s feature”. External conflicts one can withstand to a large extent but internal conflicts gnaw at your heart. Conflict born of ambivalence is the real bane. Whatever choice you make, the other one haunts you and you always dither and vacillate. This eternal problem has always

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

haunted the human race and is very well depicted in ‘The Pangs of Three Inevitable Mental Conflicts’. Hamlet has become a universal symbol of this dilemma man daily faces in life. Hazlitt rightly observed: We are all Hamlets. In our own culture, Arjuna is undoubtedly a symbol of this vacillation. For more than thirteen years he had been preparing for war with the Kauravas because of injustice and humiliation at their hands, and yet when the time comes he makes all sorts of excuses to get away from it. Had there been no Krishna, he would have run away from the war. That is the weakness of goodness. It is passive and takes refuge in escapism. Well, that is why devils rule the world.

‘The Vision Conundrum’ poses one of the biggest challenges before the modern age : How should children be brought up? The choice lies between the two: morally depraved or compromised but worldly successful and morally upright but social failures. As the poet is a realist, he exposes the dilemma the human race faces today. As we are masked by hypocrisy, we may not apparently accept but the truth can never remain hidden :

*The unscrupulous floats,
While the scrupulous sinks.
Moral principles and comfortable living
Are also antithetical, (48)*

What should parents do? “Bad feeding and grooming / Is beyond their ken.”

The dilemma makes everybody confused : parents and children both. We live in a confused world with no direction in sight. The poet, therefore asks the big, valid question : “Will this ever remain a vision conundrum?” (49)

Only great and true artists have the courage to ask such bold questions.

It is very interesting as well as painful to look at the so-called modern man. Dr Khetarpal's realism may look harsh at times but he cannot help it : Truth is mostly bitter and the reality, indeed biting. There is no scope for illusions here which alone can be sweet. 'Astrology and Sweet Future' is a hard-hitting poem that ridicules man's mad desire to " know the future, especially a rosy one." (74) Man tries to shun the suffering of the present and imagines a happy future while no one in the world can be certain of the future. It is only the romantic in P. B. Shelley, Dr Khetarpal asserts, who wrote the famous lines : "If winter comes / Can spring be far behind." Only a realist of the stature of Dr Khetarpal can question the validity of the famous quote of the great Romantic poet, which has been blindly accepted by most of the people.

'Antics' too laughs at the so-called modern men who are modern only in name while most of their actions—the poet calls them antics—smack of slave-traditions. When there has been progress in every field, man's behaviour-patterns have remained the same :

*Prostrating before authority
Reverential feet-touching,
Saluting, respecting
And displaying all courteous gestures
Connoting sanctity of tradition
Have become antics
That are commonly directed
Towards only the status
Or powers that be
And seldom towards
The worth of a person. (75)*

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

The poet reprimands all those who indulge in this kind of reprehensible behaviour:

*This is how
A modern man dupes
And is duped,
Psychologically. (75-76)*

All this creates certain funny situations too, and the poet heartily laughs at them. But he is in fact pained at this hypocritical or self-serving behaviour in the name of the tradition, and asks : “Does human psyche / Know no maturity?” (77)

The poet thus goes deep into the mind of man and raises big psychological questions. But is it psychic immaturity only? Or is it a deliberate attempt at befooling one another, doing things that the other one likes for petty gains? Is it not pure commercial attitude that governs our society?

‘Autistic Mankind’ analyses the subject of loneliness that infests today’s entire humanity. On the face of it the disease of loneliness may not look alarming at present because of the masked behaviour of human beings. But autism, in this case a social disorder, has already terribly affected the human race.

*Social isolation
And language deficits,

Though today
Affecting only its rind,
Tomorrow,
It could seep
Into its core
And fill it*

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

With blood and gore. (26-27)

The poet cries out to “save the world / From becoming / Fully autistic.” (27)

‘Pollyanna’, a very bold poem that goes against the contemporary grain which hammers day in and day out: Think positive, avoid negativity. The poet is pained to realize that everybody is trying to keep people in the dark about the reality. This reminds one of Browning’s famous lines: “God is in His heaven / And all is right with the world.” In life both positive and negative aspects are always working and integral to day-to-day living. How can you, ostrich-like, hide your face in the sand? How will you improve your life if you simply think, everything is good? How can everything be good? That is not even Nature’s design. That is running away from the sordid reality of life. Life can never be good if you don’t know how to fight the sorrows and failures, devils and demons. But they all want you to be escapist and thereby enjoy the fruit of your indifference. Don’t dread the negative aspects of life, face them, fight them and come out victorious. Be a real man, the poet wants to tell you.

‘Fatal Anxiety and Fear’ reflects the universal phenomenon of the dichotomy between love for life and fear of death. Death is a corollary of life, certain to happen one day. And that ‘one day’ makes it so uncertain that fear of death is always present in man’s psyche. The metaphor of the ‘leaking boat’ has been used so artistically here to represent TIME which of course is the most powerful factor in anybody’s life. But the poet is heartened by the “stronger rush of love / Into my life” (100) which alone can ward off the fear of death from his psyche. It is in fact love that sustains man, and can overcome the greatest hurdles, even the fear of death. This celebration of love in this poem raises Dr Khetarpal to a higher level of poetic intensity and adds another dimension to his social and spiritual consciousness.

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

‘Pyromaniacs’ Diwali’ thoughtfully, painfully, looks at the ‘happiest’ festival of India from entirely a new angle. Why does the youth enjoy so much, almost maniacally, the “maddening, deafening / And raping explosions”? the poet asks and sadly concludes that it is primarily the result of

*The repressed violence
That lies hid
In the psyche
Of thrill and sensation seekers
Of pyromaniacs (55)*

The poet goes on to observe that the youth’s masochism

*Lapses into pyromania

Into incineration
With lunatic mirth. (55)*

It is this ‘lunatic mirth’ that explodes on the Diwai night, sanctified by the tradition.

The poet is saddened when he finds the society is simply unconcerned with the problems of the youth, unable to cure its mania or give it a new direction:

*Why does insular culture show no concern,
To discern
The suppressed pangs of youths
By stealing pyromania
From their psyche? (56)*

How can the most frivolous and uncultured society, steeped only in money-mania, think of the psyche of the youth? The directionless youth drifts in search of cheap entertainment,

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

frivolously enjoying the moment, as the future is enveloped in darkness.

Every poet, since times immemorial, has craved a utopia, a perfect world of his imagination because the real world with real men never matches his vision of man and the world. 'Utopia / Dystopia' is one of the finest poems on the subject. The poet's longing for the imaginary or fanciful world is similar to the Keatsian urge to fly with the nightingale to escape the world of 'fret and fever' in his famous 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Khetarpal is torn between "dream and reality" because "reality is bitter, / Fantasy is sweet." (67) And who wants bitterness when sweetness can give you joy, at least a temporary escape from "intense and immense / Worldly pangs." But like Keats he too realizes:

*But since I'm also a real living, breathing
Throbbing and pulsating being
With earthly duties and ties
I am often forced to return to reality (68)*

though not completely, as he cannot completely shun his love for fantasy. He has thus become a psychotic, "unable to distinguish / Between reality and fantasy." (68), shuttling between the two. A very difficult situation indeed. But you have to pay the price of being a poet. You are not an ordinary mortal. Higher life of creativity and imagination tears into your soul.

*The music of jingling coins,
How heavenly is material gain
At a sight;
But becomes a bane
When death is nigh. (72)*

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

Man knows full well that materialism is no good, in fact it degenerates man, denudes him of all that is good, and yet his fascination for materialism is immense, to the extent of being maniacal. The poet in 'Fatally Maniacal Riches' laments that

*Leading a frantic life material,
We've lost the life real. (72)*

He, therefore, warns the mad seekers of money :

*Forget not that
While feeding our endless
Gluttonous senses
There is a terribly violent massacre,
Of conscience,
Of principles,
Of morals,
Of all
That brings humanity laurels. (72-73)*

But the history of man! He has hardly cared for such warnings of the visionaries, and

*Ironically, the big tough world
Has cracked under the strain
Of a small coin
By overwhelming notes
That enshroud the thinking
And vision of mankind. (73)*

Alas! Man gloats over his material achievements, and ignores all that would make him a MAN.

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

Dr Khetarpal, in his iconoclastic poem, ‘A Dialogue with Pitiabale God’, tells God plainly and honestly that His creation is far from perfect. God, according to the poet, has been reduced to a pitiabale figure because man, His finest creation, takes Him for a ride and plays all sorts of tricks to befool Him. All his so-called rituals, the poet candidly tells Him, are undertaken by him solely “to please and reach you / Through fancy deluded.” (78) It is merely a deluded fancy of the devotees when they pretend to offer special prayers to

*... increase your joys,
But sub-consciously their own...
To decrease your sorrows,
Again, sub-consciously their own... (78-79)*

Man is a very cunning creature and he squanders his money to ingratiate God and bargain with Him

*For health, wealth, prosperity
And future bright,
But can man hide
His ulterior motive from You
When You're so omniscient? (79)*

But the big question is: Why does God allow man to do all this when He knows his real intentions? Does He really enjoy the stupidity of man or want to see how far can he degrade himself? Or God too enjoys man's hypocrisy and pretensions and becomes a shareholder! The “diabolically shameless man” goes still further and

*He insinuates himself
Into Your psyche
To unconsciously and ironically*

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

*Soil Your holy image,
Your name and fame
By blasphemously attributing
Every problem, tension, disturbance,
Sorrow, war and peace
And all that happens,
That man experiences,
To the great and kind You (79)*

as if man is not accountable for anything, for any of his actions while God is responsible for all the ills that befall him or occur in the universe.. Man is so sinister that just by praying or offering some money to God, he absolves himself of all his misdeeds and puts all the blame on God. How pitiable God is that He becomes a victim of the devilish designs of man! The rational interpretation of the relationship between man and God raises many big questions and involves the entire human race. Man is a big thug and never takes the blame for his wicked deeds. He doesn't even listen to the sane advice of Krishna in the Gita. That doesn't suit him. Even God should be bewildered at the immensity of his cleverness and crookedness.

'Dark Shades of Man and Woman' attempts at understanding man-woman relationship and perhaps accepts that it has always been a riddle, and should always remain so. The poet delves deep into the minds of both man and woman, analyses their biology and psychology as best as any artist-researcher could but fails to draw any firm conclusions. Since the dawn of the universe, man-woman relationship has been found most attractive but equally enigmatic and in many cases terribly repelling. The generations of Adam and Eve have played this game for ever, forever playing hide and seek with their intent and fascination, passion and deception. Man and woman,

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

Nature's creation is such, they need and seek each other desperately, woman for security and strength, man for her grace and charms, sexual attraction being at the centre. But man is weaker in sex and quite crude in courting her while woman is subtler and makes full use of her reserve to entice and befool him. Man, in his lust for her

Demonstrates

All his satanic powers,

Incomprehensible even to biology

Or for that matter, sexology (88)

He indulges in theatrics to please her, but can never surpass the theatrics of woman who excels in playing this game for "she possesses greater finesse / And subtler deceptive devices." The poet rightly observes :

So gullible is man also

That even a semblance

Of superficial smile

On a woman's lips

Can transmit ecstatic waves (88)

It is this gullibility in man that has been the major cause of the fall of some of the most powerful men in human history. No, it is not man's fault either. It is the design of Nature. Only then Nature's purpose of 'creation' is served, sex being the most powerful instinct in man :

While man is obsessed

With sex,

Woman, with man's faithfulness...

Obsession blurs vision (90)

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

The poet thinks that this blurred vision is essential because “the naked truth” and

*Spontaneous outpourings of
consciousness*

Like a dynamite,

Could explode one

To bits (90)

But the greatest irony of man-woman relationship comes at the conclusion of the poem:

That even soul-mates,

Befool each other

Consciously, sub-consciously

Or even unconsciously. (90)

Wonderful! This is the naked truth, and the poet has tried to hammer this truth as clearly as artistically possible. Maybe some of you are saved.

‘Magical World of Research’ is a severe indictment of the research-work in the Indian university system where thesis writing is “nothing / But a recycling / Of old worn out / Recycled ideas.” (103) This kind of trivial, plagiarized research work characterizes not only the ordinary, average universities but also the most prestigious universities of India. It is only because of this contemptible and deplorable attitude that no research work worth the name has been done anywhere in India. Here mediocrity rules, and form governs rather than the content. Everybody is in this demeaning racket. This dismal state of educative-process, even at the highest level, is one of the prime causes of our bankrupt minds and barren souls.

Fathoming Infinity is one of the finest collections of poems that have come out in recent years. It is a ‘must read’ for every lover

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

of literature. These poems would certainly enrich and enlighten his vision and consciousness.

Reference

1. Khetarpal, Dr Dalip. *Fathoming Infinity*. Gurgaon : The Poetry Society of India, 2015. Print.



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

ISSN 2250-3366

eISSN 2394-6075

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.

[Contemporary Literary Review India](#)

The journal that brings articulate writing for articulate readers.

CLRI is published in two editions (1) online quarterly (eISSN 2394-6075) (2) print annually (ISSN 2250-3366). CLRI is one of the leading journals in India and attracts a wide audience each month. CLRI is listed/indexed with many reputed literary directories, repositories, and many universities in India. We promote authors in many ways. We publish, promote and nominate our authors to various literary awards. It is absolutely free to register, submit and get published with CLRI.

Register with us
at: [Subscriber to
CLRI](#)

Get your [book
reviewed](#) by us.

[Donate to Us](#)
We seek donation.
