

AUTHOR INTERVIEW: U ATREYA SARMA

By Sunil Sharma

Q: Congrats! Your debut collection of poems is remarkable. How did it happen?

Thank you. When a poet and critic of your competence finds my *Sunny Rain-n-Snow* remarkable, I feel humbled as well as vindicated. It began to happen more than a decade ago and since then I have written over 250 poems. The 'Your Space' column of the *Muse India* literary e-zine, a good platform for aspiring as well as seasoned poets and litterateurs, helped me a great deal when I was regularly reading the poetry of others, posting my own poems, and taking part in and reading the interactions/ discussion boards. Also participation in quite a few literary festivals and meets, publication of my poems/articles/reviews at various places, and the unexpected offer 8 years ago to be an editor of *Muse India* gave me the needed self-assurance.

When the literary ambience is redolent with poetic profusion, with so many poets young and old alike coming out with their poetic work, I thought, why not I bring out my own book of poetry. It was no doubt an arduous and prolonged ordeal to shortlist, pick and choose the poems for the collection. At times I would feel whether at all the exercise was worth it; whether at all the poems were good enough. I referred them to a cross-section of literary friends; and they approved of them. They also offered some constructive suggestions which certainly went to help me. I was also into translation of poetry and fiction from Telugu into English. And over 3 years ago I was offered a weekly column in *The Hans India*, a Hyderabad-based English daily, wherein to present poets from across the country and a few times even from abroad. The column is still running. An ongoing reading and analysis of these poems served as a touchstone on which to evaluate my own poems. It was only after I became confident enough, I picked out 63 of my poems and went in for the publication of my maiden collection of poetry.

Q: What were the moments of joy and pain during its composition?

It was an inseparable blend of joy and pain like the pangs of a pregnant woman conceiving and delivering her child. No pains, no gains. No poem came out in a jiffy or with perfect ease, for asking. Churning and turmoil underlay each and every poem, though it was relatively easier with some. The birth of a child in itself is not enough. The baby has to be washed, cleaned, nourished, and snuggled. Likewise, every poem on its supposed completion has to be gone over again and again, chiseled, rephrased, dressed and condensed. And then changing the original titles of some of the poems, tracing the date of each composition, and classifying them into appropriate sections was no doubt a daunting job, but a pleasant one.

Q: Post-writing, what was the feeling? Delight? Sadness? Both?

It is only delight. Delight for having accomplished what had been conceived and planned. No sadness at all for the conception visualized a psychological insurance against eventuality of any kind. You had to take a calculated risk, when you believed in your enterprise.

Q: How does the process of composition begin with you? Spontaneous? Planned? Both?

It is both. It is only rarely that a poem comes out spontaneously and in a brief time. A flash of idea or imagination would certainly strike everyone. We have to note it down immediately, to later on ruminate over it and develop it into a poem. We are all, of course, urged by a happening, a scene, or a situation to explore and interpret it in our own way. But when asked for writing a poem on a particular theme for a lit-fest or a journal or anthology, or when we have to compose a metrical poem, or an acrostic, or a poem covering a particular occasion – to celebrate it, or to bless, congratulate or pay tribute to someone, it is certainly the plan that plays a major part.

Q: How was the experience of finding a publisher? Any agent? Did you approach the publisher? Or, did they approach you?

A few publishers approached me generally; but I wanted to tend my first baby myself. I didn't think of any agent, for I had no knowledge of any agents in the Indian market. I googled quite a bit, and considering several aspects – quality, professionalism, freedom to the poet, etc – I zeroed in on Partridge, an associate of Penguin.

Q: How is the marketing of the book going on?

It is still in the initial stages with a few of the formalities with the publisher yet to be completed. The book both in its paperback and Kindle versions is available at over half a dozen e-retail outlets like Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Flipkart. The reviews are underway. In the meantime, I am sure, coverage by journals like *Episteme* would also help provide visibility to the book. In the coming few months, I propose to launch the book in quite a few cities and places, and also publicize it online to the extent I can.

Q: As an editor, you have published poets and writers in various places. How does it feel to be an editor?

Calling for poems, articles and stories, interacting with various writers, editing and presenting them gives me immense satisfaction. I respect my writers irrespective of their age, value their work, am most usually prompt in my correspondence, and keep my relationship with them as respectful and friendly as possible.

Q: And as a poet? Is it different?

As an editor you read the work of others, and also try to read their mind and heart. As a poet you have to fend for yourself, motivated by inspiration either from within or from outside, and read your own mind and heart. While the editorial work is a task that is entrusted by someone else or voluntarily taken up or accepted; the activity of poetic composition is mostly involuntary. While

an editing task is objective and rather intellectual, the process of poetry writing is subjective and emotional.

Q: What is poetry for you?

For me, poetry is an aesthetic expression of any experience, moment, observation, idea or reflection that engages a poet intensely and irrepressibly.

Q: What is the central premise of this impressive first book of poetry?

The central premise of my book is the contemporary social milieu, with the mood of the poems ranging from gravity to levity, anger to angst, sympathy to empathy, and ardour to humour – in tune with the context, in addition to a few psychedelic flights of fancy and epiphanic insights. The titles I have given to the various sections in the book give an idea of the thematic variety that has gone into the book. The sections are Femina, Facets of Nature, Epiphanies, Americana, Musings on Poesy, Relations & Equations, Romantic Peeps, Reflectively Yours, Social Bristles, Tongue-in-Cheek, Occasional Voices, and Metrical Forays. Whatever the themes I selected, I took optimal care to be lucid and direct, and strove to be generally eclectic and harmonious in spirit.

Q: Any other book in near future?

Yes, in a few months and well before the year ends, I propose to come up with my second collection of poetry.

Q: Message for readers and peers from a senior savant like you?

Sans readers, no book can exist; they are the real patrons. Readers are vast and an assorted assemblage with varied tastes. And poetry readers are different, since poetry is different from the other genres. I don't think the readers need any message as such from an author. If the readers are beginners, I venture to say a few words:

‘Poetry is like an unknown or half-known terrain. Explore it and the joy of discovering things will be your own and it would be rewarding. There could be thickets, uneven paths and outcrops in the form of some odd diction or hitherto unknown words from the angle of such readers; there could be ditches and trenches in the form of unexplained ideas hiding in or between the lines, leaving an opportunity for the reader to bridge them up and interpret for themselves. A bit of a dictionary habit and mental exercise would facilitate poetry appreciation. Let’s, as readers, ponder over what a veteran and prolific writer of 60 books across the genres says:

“Good poetry always lends itself to interpretations. The inquisitive/ patient/ diligent reader would surely be rewarded. And that is literary appreciation. A quick reading is not the right thing in trying to go to the heart of the matter. Quick reading is for crime fiction – the mind-heart races but in reading a poem the heart slows down and the mind thinks of the various possible alternatives. The poet does not expect the reader to rush; a poem is meant for slow chewing, for traversing back and forth to understand the import of imaginative writing. (Dr VVB Rama Rao from his upcoming book *Femininity – Poetic Endeavours*)”

With the peer writers I would share: ‘Let’s learn from one other, and from the unexplored facets of what is visible or apparently invisible; and convey things that could enhance the positive qualities and reduce or control the negative proclivities in us.’

Q: Atreya Sarma is a solid name in the world literature. Describe him in third person singular, please. Warts and all, if any.

U Atreya Sarma is a literary dilettante, trying his best, with all his limitations, to add his inch of contribution to the humongous world of literature. He wishes he had more energy, more resourcefulness, more fecund afflatus, a sharper memory, a much faster reading pace, more assimilating capacity, less laziness, more stamina, a wider and deeper understanding of the people around him. In short, he wishes to be a more accomplished person, and a better human being.

Q: The role of artist in a consumer society?

A consumerist society is indicative of growing material wealth and comforts, and it is a good thing in this economy-driven world. But sheer materialism can't give us every pleasure. There are certain pleasures of the heart and the soul that only art in its broader sense and gamut can give. A healthy blend of consumerism and connoisseurship would keep the society sound and fulfilled. So an artist has his role cut out; it is to expand his horizons, go to the depth of things, cultivate a holistic vision, and try his conscientious best to relentlessly pursue, propagate and promote his and others' art – for an orderly and balanced progress of the society. And he must always be modest, but never doctrinaire, presumptuous or authoritarian.

Q: Thanks and best wishes for your second career as a great communicator of ideas.

Thank you so much for giving me this honour of sharing my reflections through the unique *Episteme*.

Bio

Sunil Sharma is a bilingual critic, poet, literary interviewer, editor, translator, essayist and fiction writer. Some of his poems and shorts have been anthologized in national and international collections, published from India, Canada and USA. Besides that, he is a freelance journalist and blogger. His areas of strength are Marxism, Literary Theory and Cultural Studies.

His poems are also featured prominently on Boloji.Com and Destiny Poets. UK, and, on many other on-line poetry groups. Anthologies from Canada and USA have included his select poems.

As a freelance journalist, he has more than 1,000 news articles published in DK Plus, Times of India, Mumbai.

His six short stories and the novel *Minotaur* were also prescribed recently under the Post-colonial Studies at the Clayton University, Morrow, Georgia, USA.

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Sunil was declared as the ICOP (International Community of Poets) Poet of the Year - 2012 by the leading UK-based The Destiny Poets: <http://www.destinypoets.co.uk/>

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