

BOOK REVIEW

By Dr. Sunil Sharma

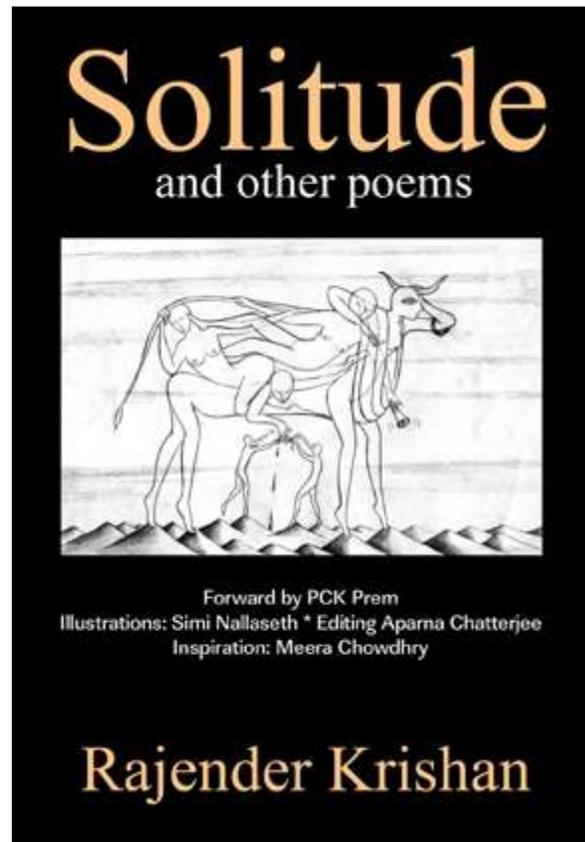
Solitude and Other Poems by Rajender Krishan

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A collection of 60 poems - each illustrated

The New York-based poet / thinker / translator / writer / administrator / estate consultant Rajender Krishan (RK), in his latest avatar as a poet for a post-modernist / globalized world, offers a rich spread of poems that can be both an aesthetic delight for the initiate and a hermeneutic challenge to those expecting readerly texts in the Barthesian sense.

Intriguingly called *Solitude and other poems* (available through Amazon), the book is an investigation into the everyday realities and a poetic exploration of the themes and motifs taken from a humdrum existence that contains within the promise of the beyond - provided you are searching for that elusive realm. With an extensive foreword by PCK Prem, RK gracefully acknowledges his wife Meera as his inspiration, the editing support of Aparna Chatterjee (Poetry Editor, Boloji.com); and film-maker, animator and writer Simi Nallaseth who has captured the profundity of the poems with illustrations that add a novel artistic insight to each and every poem.



The book is an exciting collection full of insights into the mind of a man living in the first world but harking back to a third-world philosophical outlook on the nature of reality, universe and life therein ... and their meaning to us. That he is able to strike a balance between the two polarities is real remarkable literary feat.

The striking synthesis in English for diversified global audiences is bold and effortless creative process - result of years of deep meditation on some fundamental questions about *Prakariti* and *Purusha*. Influenced by Kabir, the great saint-poet of India, RK is in search of some liberating truths through the medium of poetry – an exalted medium for him, a tool to study and express profound truths as he sees them in the free-verse form. A good example is his tribute to humble onion and finding the cosmic meaning, after a careful stripping of layers that sting:

All layers strewn
the bulb obliterated
core unsheathed
one grasps a tangible nothing
realizes an intangible something
(*Core of the Onion* p-1)

That ordinary onion can reveal metaphysical truths to a seeking mind and discerning eye is confirmed – so is the influence of Kabir on this idea. Kabir expresses his vision through simple objects that act as metaphors for divine truths for the community of his believers. Onion, like lotus plant, excites the imagination of saint poets and can reveal realities and divine aspects obscured for ordinary eyes. RK finds in the multi-layered humble edible root the dualism of destructible body / eternal atman – a deep metaphysical strand in Indian philosophy. Citing this in English poetry by an Indian-American successful entrepreneur-cum-poet is an act of good faith – and the acerbic, inquiring poet has plenty of that. Very few practicing poets belonging to IWE (Indian Writing in English) have attempted this so far. Most of such hybrid poetry is happy quoting Spinoza, Eliot or Pound. RK changes the paradigm. The metaphysical strain is back in poetry, thanks to his preoccupations.

Look at the title poem *Solitude*:

Untiring is the phenomenon
yet unruffled remains the witness
to this incredible marvel
of pristine amusement

(*Solitude* p-3)

Here the gaze wanders from one point to another; the progress is recorded and reported in fast cadence, almost breathless in scope, of the whirl-wind of thoughts, binaries and associations. Finite / infinite; mind / space; manifest / obscured; journey / destination; goal-setting / realization are all hinted at in the lines that move at super-speed and the text itself is broken down in small units as a stylistic device that broadly reminds of the experimental E.E. Cummings and the breadth of poetic inquiry into the nature, experience and texture of loaded concepts like solitude or space of Whitman, Wordsworth and Marquez.

Another interesting poem is *Breath* – essential for the living, called *Prana*. Here RK talks of its nature and says that the act of breathing makes beings, beings. It is purely effortless process, inhaling / exhaling and *Prana* is a vital link to our earthly existence, and here, at this critical juncture, raises the question of the relevance of the constructs like caste, creed and rules that are designed to oppress:

And yet
ad infinitum
my mundane “I”
proclaims
that I know my Self
(*Breath* p-5)

This is an inversion deftly obtained and an expansion of the scope of the poem. The clever transition from the philosophical to the social is a stunning turnaround for the reader who is expecting a discourse on life and human existence from a

metaphysical perspective. This is a technique developed by the poet in many of his poems. Neat breaks from physical to metaphysical and vice versa and lead to some questions that disturb smugness and finally, end in the raising of consciousness – one of the primary objectives of serious writing anywhere.

Another thoughtful poem is *Speech*. Take a look:

Experience tranquility
take a deep breath
whatever the emotion
build the right composure
speak harmoniously
remain peaceful

So proclaim the Masters

When will I embrace
the wisdom of this science?
(*Speech* p-7)

How speech can impact our lives is illustrated in the above lines with the advice that one has to cultivate speech – language – and exercise full control over it to ensure a state of wellness. Speech can lead to harmony. It can disrupt harmony. It can be positive. It can be negative. Its conscious use depends on us. Sermons give enlightenment. Hate-speech leads to mayhem. The Shanti-message by the poet is relevant to a strife-torn divisive world where inflamed words can cause enough destruction and create the other for purely political expediency.

Here is *Tat Tvam Asi* that is different in tone and texture:

I hear my Twin's echo
Look beyond
the dichotomy of life
Tat Tvam Asi

(*Tat Tvam Asi* p-39)

These are stirring lines from RK in search of the intangible, the spiritual, the higher realization. Despite a meditative tone, the poems do talk of this world. He talks of the immediate also in poems like Sandy's *Tandava* and *Nirbhya*. These pieces portray the social concerns of a man deeply interested in community, nation and world. USA and India find echoes in his poetic landscape. Tornadoes or rapes arousing massive anger and protests engage the attention of the alert poet. *Death in Kindergarten* is a meditation on violence. *Wolves, Overpopulation, Kill the devil, Migratory Birds, Misanthropists* and other poems reveal a complex mind at work, trying to decipher for itself and us the riddles of being alive in an increasingly hostile world pursuing wealth and power and converting us into consumers for vast international markets spawned by the mighty multi-national companies. RK addresses the angst of a fractured and isolated individual – a middle-class educated professional living in a glass ghetto – and tries to find out comforting answers in a degraded society that has already jettisoned its overarching humane concerns.

His *Hunger* is a searing comment on the culture of excessive consumption and a wake-up call. *A Hindu Obligation* takes on the Hindu rituals/festivals and emphasizes the importance of environment and the indispensable association of trees in our lives.

RK represents a success story in a land of migrants and his overall concerns are humane and democratic ones. These poems are both the subtle celebrations of life and a quest for deeper meaning informing the outer layers of human existence, the appearance. They freely intermingle the sacred and the mundane, the topical and the profound, immediacy and distant in a style that sometimes borders on the heavy and dense. Words seem to crowd the small internal space, desperate to be heard. They issue forth in a torrent and sometimes distract. Perhaps the dense images warrant such a density in some poems. Rest just flow – like a sparkling spring on a clear sunny day and communicate with you, restoring your faith in words again; Words that heal and renovate through the form of poetry.

Words undergo dramatic changes in the skillful hands of the observant poet. They vibrate with raw energy, are sensuous, sometimes angry, sometimes soothing; screaming or very quiet. The style often alternates between the dark and light; intellectual and emotional, and, interrogatory and the epiphanic. You get the sense of words gliding off the white spaces and entering recipient's consciousness with great force. And changing it forever!

Thoughts delicately are caught in these renewed words and then presented in poetic form for a reader looking for serious interaction in an age of the instant and ephemeral. The enchanting exchange leaves the reader enriched and fulfilled.

Solitude and other poems is an excellent collection of poems and it announces the arrival of a major poet.

Bio:

Sunil Sharma is Principal at Bharat College – affiliated to University of Mumbai, Mumbai – at Badlapur, Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), India. He is a bilingual critic, poet, literary interviewer, editor, translator, essayist and fiction writer.