Preserving Human Dignity Amidst Silence and Erasure: A Conversation with Susheel Sharma

Danielle Hanson

University of California, Irvine, United States of America

DH1: *Unwinding Self* is your third published collection of poetry. What do you feel is different in these poems compared to your past collections? What did you learn in the creation of this book?

SKS1: Yes, you are right — *Unwinding Self* (2020) is my third collection of poems, following *From the Core Within* (1999) and *The Door is Half Open* (2012). As you may notice, there is a considerable gap between the publication dates of these books. During the intervening years, I have matured across various dimensions — physical, intellectual, emotional, moral, social, literary, philosophical, and spiritual. Naturally, this evolution has influenced the creation of my poems and, consequently, the nature of each collection.

There are several markers in *Unwinding Self* that indicate the emergence of new concerns — not only related to poetry, but also to history, cultural identity, and the limits of the self. Critics have observed that the poems in *Unwinding Self* reflect a clear evolution in voice, thematic maturity, and philosophical engagement.

While *From the Core Within* is largely introspective, dealing with personal and emotional landscapes, it speaks in a youthful, searching voice — one that is still exploring identity, desire, and human vulnerability. In contrast, *The Door is Half Open* broadens its focus to social observation. It addresses issues such as middle-class anxieties, gender dynamics, societal hypocrisy, and an emerging scepticism. The tone becomes more layered and often ironic.

Unwinding Self, however, leans toward a philosophical — even spiritual — meditation on selfhood, history, mortality, and national identity. The confessional mode of earlier work gives way to a deeper engagement with deconstructing personal and collective myths — hence, the "unwinding." The emotional immediacy of the early poems is replaced by a calm, observant tone — almost sage-like, though still laced with irony. There is greater emotional restraint, likely stemming from maturity and intellectual distance.

This collection also experiments more boldly with intertextuality and cultural references — drawing from Puranic, Vedic, historical, and political material — and makes use of satire. It includes prose-poems, reflective essays in verse, and documentary-style narratives. The work displays a confident mixing of registers: colloquial, philosophical, journalistic, and literary.

In *Unwinding Self*, there is a noticeable shift in the conception of the self — no longer seen as an isolated psychological being, but as a product of history, tradition, power structures, and myth. While earlier

poems reflected the influence of English lyrical poetry, this collection more confidently blends Indian cultural motifs, philosophical traditions, and classical forms with English poetic idioms. There is a greater use of *dhvani* (suggestion), allusions to karmic cycles, Indian ethical binaries (*paap/punya*), and even Sanskritic rhythms — all without compromising accessibility. *Unwinding Self* reflects my learning journey as a thinker, reader, and citizen of a complex nation. In this collection, I feel, I not only write poems but use poetry as a tool to dissect memory, myth, nation, and selfhood.

A friend of mine, the late Professor Dube, has said that compared to the earlier work, *Unwinding Self* shows a bolder voice: less afraid of offending societal or religious sensibilities; more comfortable blending irony, sarcasm, and sacred reference and willing to show the hypocrisies of systems once respected. I feel that poetic truth sometimes requires risking reverence to reveal deeper authenticity.

DH2: As a professor, what does the practice of teaching bring to your writing? The poem "On Reading Langston Hughes' 'Theme For English B'" speaks of a personal impact of teaching on you as a professor. I'm interested in all three aspects of teaching/writing: teaching and student interactions as subject matter for poetry, student interactions impacting the professor personally, teaching and student interactions as an influence on the craft of poetry.

SKS2: Your question touches on the intersection of scholarship and creativity. As a teacher of English literature, I regularly engage with classical and modern poetic forms, Western literary movements (like Classicism, Neo-classicism, Romanticism, Modernism, Postcolonialism, etc.), and canonical poets and their techniques—from Shakespeare and Eliot to Dickinson, Hughes, Tagore, Walcott, and Kalidasa (in translation). In addition, I teach English-language courses, which also include Linguistics, Phonetics and Modern Grammar. These experiences as a professor of both literature and language deeply inform my poetic practice.

There are several intersectional areas that may be of interest to the academic scholarship: literary scholarship, language teaching, postcolonial consciousness, dialogic methods, and comparative reading. In *Unwinding Self*, for instance, one may hear echoes of T. S. Eliot's cultural fragmentation, W. H. Auden's moral introspection, and Indian epic traditions reimagined in contemporary idiom — just to mention a few.

Teaching English in India entails navigating between two epistemes—the Western literary canon and Indian cultural frameworks. This dual awareness, I believe, constitutes a central strength of my poetry. My work frequently interrogates cultural colonization, linguistic alienation, and the politics of identity—issues organically tied to postcolonial pedagogy. I consciously attempt to bridge Sanskritic ideas with Western critical theory. For example, the micro-poems in "Stories from the Mahabharata" condense the Sanskritic epic into minimalist form, paralleling Imagism and

Modernist minimalism. Many poems in *Unwinding Self* are full of multiple voices — guru, student, critic, commoner which reflects (Bakhtin's) Dialogic Imagination.

The teacher-student dynamic in "On Reading Langston Hughes' 'Theme for English B' mirrors *guru-shishya parampara*[1], but is reframed through Freirean pedagogy — challenging authority, re-humanizing education. "Chasing a Dream on the Ganges" blends pilgrimage, ritual, and observation with a stream-of-consciousness tone reminiscent of Woolf or Joyce, while grounding itself in Ganga as a mythic symbol. The poem though sensitive to colonial epistemes, is grounded in indigenous faith, knowledge and wisdom. "Thus Spake a Woman" is an example of Bakhtinian revoicing: the persona adopts a female voice that challenges patriarchal norms. There is social stratification of language in this poem — traditional male authority vs. the female perspective that reclaims the right to speak. This poem echoes Bakhtin's idea that language is never neutral; it is always shaped by social power and ideological struggle.

Teachers of literature are trained in close reading, critical discussion, and interpretation. Consequently, my poems often ask more than they assert—employing a Socratic method (also Upanishadic in a sense) that leaves space for reflection. They frequently end on an open, meditative note rather than on a fixed moral closure. Many poems in the collection exhibit a dialectical movement between claim and counterclaim, embracing ambiguity and paradox. *Unwinding Self* does not imitate Western models like Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, but enters into a dialogue with them. As a professor, I absorb the forms, tones, and techniques of writers like Eliot; as a poet, I retool them to engage with Indian symbols, silences, and disillusionments.

Now let me turn to the second part of your question. The persona in *"On Reading Langston Hughes' 'Theme for English B'"* is not necessarily the poet himself, though one is free to trace (auto)biography in it. If the poet is taken to be the speaker, the poem's meaning and intention would be overly restricted. Rather, the poem offers a quiet meditation on the intersection of pedagogy, identity, and empathy. It shows how teaching is not merely a professional activity, but a transformational, spiritual, and political one.

Let me clarify my position as a teacher-poet. Langston Hughes' *"Theme for English B,"* a seminal American poem, critiques how race, power, and education are intertwined. My poem, written decades later in an Indian context, is not simply a literary response but also a pedagogical confession of a conscientious teacher in an Indian academic institution. It exposes the teacher's biases, assumptions, and vulnerabilities, as well as the vocal assertiveness of an underprivileged student. The poem compels the teacher to re-evaluate his or her position—not just as an educator in the given system, but as a human being in a complex and unequal society. Teaching becomes a mirror, not a pulpit. The teacher yields to the student's lived reality and, in doing so, temporarily sets aside the so-called standards of the educational system. My poem is not about Hughes but shows how the

teacher-student dynamics dents the educational system and how it brings about the moral transformation of a teacher. In this sense, teaching becomes an ethical journey—one that disrupts comfort, demands introspection, and humanizes the teacher.

My poem is longer, more narratival, almost a monologue or dramatic poem — not a lyric or free-verse meditation. While Hughes uses subtle irony and lyrical understatement, one will come across direct realism, moral urgency, and dramatic shifts in my poem. Still, the intertextual reference to Hughes is not merely a literary homage; it becomes a reflective surface that turns inward, addressing caste, class, and education in India. My poem is not just a response to "Theme for English B" — it is a response to what we, as educators and citizens, do when confronted with truth in its rawest form.

Having said that, let me turn to the third part of your question. Any teaching activity (including creative/ poetry writing) revolves around the following six factors: teacher, learner, subject matter, teaching-methods, evaluation and funding. My poem deals with all these dimensions. Let me try to evaluate, by comparing, some of the issues in Langston Hughes' "Theme for English B" and my "On Reading Langston Hughes' 'Theme for English B'." In both poems education is reimagined not as the delivery of a syllabus, but as an ethical encounter. Both poems question: *Can education empower the poor? Or does it reinforce barriers? Can a teacher be taught? Can writing become liberation?* In the following table, I have tried to make a comparative study of both the poems based on the six parameters mentioned above:

Factor	**Langston Hughes**	**Susheel Kumar Sharma**
Teacher	Structurally privileged, silent	Biased, then self-questioning
Learner	Marginalized, articulate	Marginalized, resilient
Subject	Self as text	Self as struggle
Method	Open prompt	Initially hierarchical, then dialogic
Evaluation	Implicit, mutual	Reversed, moral
Funding	Implied	Central, urgent

In both poems, teaching and student interactions are not peripheral but central poetic arenas of confrontation, confession, and transformation. That teacher-student interaction is the poetic core in Hughes' "Theme for English B" is evident from the following:

- The prompt "Go home and write a page..." is the spark for the poem.
- The entire poem is the student's reflective response—a quiet challenge to the teacher's assumed neutrality.
- The poem becomes a dialogue about the inequities in race, identity, and education ("You are white— / yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.")

That the interaction is the poetic core in my poem is evident from the following:

- The teacher as speaker narrates his transformative encounter — the poem is told from his perspective, unlike Hughes'.
- The student's resilience prompts the teacher to face uncomfortable questions/truths and makes him run into self-reflection.
- The poem reveals the teacher's initial prejudice, his awakening, and moral reckoning ("I doubted my qualifications to teach him.")

That the student is the Poetic Catalyst in my poem is evident from:

- The student's life story becomes a poem within the poem — raw, vivid, moving and morally compelling.
- His unfiltered testimony disrupts the teacher's assumptions:

"Have you ever stayed / in such a place, Sir? / How then will you know my agony?"

Here is the comparative analysis of the poetic subject matters:

Poetic Subject Matter in Hughes' Poem	**Poetic Subject Matter in Sharma's Poem**
Hughes critiques the emotional and cultural distance between teacher and student in a racially divided society.	Sharma turns the teacher-student interaction into a moral and social crisis.
Hughes reclaims the classroom as a space for subjective truths and not just standardized knowledge.	Sharma deconstructs the classroom as a neutral epistemic space—it becomes a battleground of caste, poverty, and power.
The teacher is both a symbol of institutional authority and a participant in shared national identity.	The teacher is decentered, and education becomes a site of injustice and redemption.

So, it is evident that both Hughes and I use these interactions to explore larger truths about society: in Hughes, they are race, identity and freedom whereas in mine they are caste, poverty, access to education and moral responsibility. These poems transform the classroom (the centre place for teacher-taught interaction) into a space of:

- Power dynamics
- Cultural tension
- Mutual misunderstanding and revelation
- Social critique
- Mutual transformation (both of the teacher and the student)

"No conflict, no drama," says Bernard Shaw. In both poems, the dramatic force emerges from the tension and dialogue between teacher and student. The classroom is not just a physical space—it is a poetic one, where truths are exchanged, power is questioned, and humanity is either deepened or denied.

Since a poem is a poet's creation, whatever is happening in a poem may be the outcome of the personality of the poet which is the sum total of various interactions. I'm sure your queries have been answered to your satisfaction. However, you are free to disagree with me and interpret the poems in any way you like.

DH3: Several of these poems are persona poems, with speakers who are very different from you. In particular I'm thinking of "Me, A Black Doxy" and "Bubli Poems." There are others in the book as well. Why do you want to speak for these people, and what would you want the reader to take from these poems?

SKS3: Authors do not always write about themselves or the people they are familiar with. They should not. They should be able to assume the personality of the character they are writing about. This characteristic has been described as "Negative Capability" by Keats[2]. He describes it as the capacity of a poet to be "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." In other words, it's the poet's ability to let go of ego, certainty, and fixed identity, empathize deeply with another's experience and to remain suspended in ambiguity without demanding resolution. Negative Capability becomes an ethical practice — the poet must enter the inner world of the persona, not to judge or instruct, but to witness and reveal. Not everyone is gifted with this kind of ability and aptitude.

Indian aestheticians (in Indian Poetic Theory[3]) also have pondered over the creative mental state of the poet at the time of composition and called it *Madhumatī Bhūmikā* or *Madhyama Bhāva*. It is the intermediate poetic ground — a state between: *pramāṭṛ* (the poet-knower) and *prameya* (the poetic object or theme). It is a sweet, suggestive, and resonant emotional zone, where the *rasa* (aesthetic essence) is neither forcibly expressed nor fully withheld — a zone of gentle empathy, imaginative resonance, and suspension. It is a sweet, elevated, and intuitive state of mind, neither entirely intellectual nor entirely emotional. In this state, the poet is inspired, alert, and inwardly calm, open to subtle truths and imaginative insight. The poet is neither dominated by ego nor purely reactive — rather, they exist in a balanced, meditative flow of creativity. Thus, both Keats's concept of Negative Capability and the Indian aesthetic framework of *Madhyama* or *Madhumatī Bhūmikā* (the sweet or intermediate poetic state) are deeply relevant to understanding persona poetry.

In a persona poem the poet enters the *bhāva* of the speaker, without dissolving their own insight; the emotion is suggested, not over-explained, allowing *rasa* to be relished by the reader. So, without this

capability, no poet can be successful as a creative writer. A poet writing in another's voice must immerse in the emotional logic of that voice, avoid imposing their moral superiority and allow conflicting truths to co-exist. Negative Capability is foundational in persona poetry, especially when the speaker is radically different from the poet. May I illustrate this from "Me, A Black Doxy," the poem that you have in mind: "My skin is black / My soul ain't black / My money ain't black / Their acts is black." This is not a declaration of innocence, but a layered evocation of moral ambiguity, resilience, and sacred irony — an example of Negative Capability/*madhumatī bhūmikā* at work.

There is a clear distinction between "writing as someone" and "writing with someone's voice in mind." When one writes as someone — one takes care to listen, research, and avoid stereotypes. When one has another option in mind one writes with someone in mind — the stance largely becomes reflective, dialogic, respectful. For example, Langston Hughes in "Theme for English B" is writing as a student (embodied voice). But my "On Reading Langston Hughes' 'Theme for English B'" is written with that student in mind, from the perspective of a teacher inspired and troubled by a student's words (proximate empathy). All the creative writers assume the role of spokespersons of someone else than their own selves. Sometimes they speak both for the hero and anti-hero simultaneously. This is most evident in a play. Shakespeare, for example, writes/speaks like a Christian (Antonio), like a Jew (Shylock), like a father (Polonius), like a son (Laertes), like a duke (Prospero), like an ambitious duchess (Eleanor Cobham), like a weak king (Duncan), like a powerful queen (Cleopatra), like a meek queen (Gertrude), three daughters with different temperaments (in *King Lear*) and the like. In the case of poetry, too, several poets have tried to write about the others, ranging from duchess to mythical characters to philosophers to flowers to ordinary coloured men and women. Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" and "Andrea del Sarto," Carol Ann Duffy's "Mrs. Midas" and "Medusa," Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son" and "Minstrel Man," Louise Glück's "Gretel in Darkness" and "Penelope's Song" and Ai Ogawa's dramatic monologues are some off-hand examples.

It is true that most of the Shakespearean characters named above are from the uppermost echelons of the society, in keeping with Aristotle's dictums. As royalty gave way to democracy, even the characters from lower strata of society found a place in literature. Dickens' and Hardy's characters are examples of this. These days creating an egalitarian society is the political, social and academic objective for the intellectuals. In such a society every human being irrespective of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, class, caste, economic status, colour, educational background, profession and the like is entitled to live with dignity and honour. In this light, a literary voice is to be given even to the characters from the marginalised sections and professions. Though the commodification of sex has fascinated writers, playwrights and painters for centuries, there is hardly a voice of a coloured prostitute in the mainstream literature.

You may like to see Michèle Roberts' "The fallen woman: prostitution in literature", (*The Guardian*, Fri 14 Apr., 2017) for some details on the issue. It is in this light that a poem like "Me, A Black Doxy" is to be viewed.

Similarly, Bubli in "Bubli Poems", is a narrative of a rural girl who is later urbanized — a polyphonic biography of Indian womanhood in the 21st century. She begins as an innocent village girl caught in the crosshairs of youthful attention and societal judgement, and over the course of the poem, becomes a symbol of modern Indian womanhood in all its tension, fragmentation, aspiration, and spiritual yearning. As a student, a dancer, a seeker, a rebel, she emerges as India's new woman, caught between freedom and commodification, tradition and transformation, voice and silence. Through her character the society is being interrogated: education, religion, gender roles, media, medicine, globalism — no system is above question. The "Bubli Poems" invite the readers to reconsider assumptions about women's "freedom," acknowledge the burdens of modernity, see spiritual hunger not as regression but as a search for transcendence, question how media, institutions, and patriarchy co-opt identity and understand that inner chaos is part of self-becoming. The final poems (IX–XI) transform Bubli from a figure of sociological curiosity into a philosophical and spiritual seeker — echoing the Bhakti saints, mystics, and rebels of Indian tradition. The poem in a certain way challenges the Western notions of feminism.

As a poet and teacher of literature, I am trained in voices — Shakespeare's Shylock, Melville's Ishmael, an unnamed narrator in *The Scarlet Letter*, Tagore's Kabuliwala, Toni Morrison's Sethe, Langston Hughes's student in "Theme for English B" and the like. Literature is, at its best, a rehearsal of conscience, a way of holding up difficult lives to the light, not to judge but to understand. Having said this much, I wouldn't claim I "speak for" the characters like a coloured doxy, Bubli, a migrant labourer and the like so much as I attempt to lend space to voices that are often denied expression in polite, literary, or institutional discourse. The speakers in poems like "Me, A Black Doxy" or the "Bubli Poems" emerge not as ventriloquized characters, but as moral witnesses to systemic injustice. My intention is not to appropriate their experience, but to explore the limits and responsibilities of empathy — what it means to imagine the world through the eyes of someone utterly othered by caste, class, race, gender, or profession. In that sense, these persona poems are both acts of imagination and self-interrogation.

I know when a sensitive reader reads some of these poems about people they often ignore and trash, or the stories that they generally sanitize, they may feel uncomfortable. They might ask: Why have I never heard a prostitute speak like this before? Why does the voice of a street girl feel more truthful than a textbook? What does it mean to pray when you're excluded from temples, classrooms, bedrooms, or rights? If they ask something like this, my purpose is done and will indicate my success as a poet. I want my readers to realize that dignity is not the privilege of the educated, or the devout, or the successful. It

is inherent — and sometimes the most bruised voices carry the deepest wisdom. These persona poems are bridges of attention. Not because I claim to understand every wound, but because I believe that in imagining the lives of others with humility and risk, we extend the moral circumference of poetry itself.

DH4: One thing poetry does well is to make the personal universal, and the universal personal. Can you speak to that in your work?

SKS4: It's a tall order, but let me try to respond with reference to a few of my poems. The dual movement between the personal and the universal is a hallmark of all enduring poetry. This is what allows readers across generations and cultures to relate to a poem or a work of art. If a poem is to survive the test of time, universality must be central to its poetic ethos.

For this to happen, the poet must unravel their own identity — and not in a way that leads to disintegration, but toward deeper understanding. The title of my collection, *Unwinding Self*, reflects this idea: a purposeful loosening of fixed identities. Through the poetic voice, I attempt to unwind the tightly bound threads of gender, class, geography, profession, and even time. In doing so, I hope to discover not only the many selves within me, but also the many selves within all of us.

Many of my poems begin with intimate or local experiences—family, teaching, religion, memory — and then draw out broader human implications. For example:

- In "The End of the Road," the speaker's deteriorating eyesight becomes a metaphor for the passage of time and the fragility of perception, touching on themes of aging and existential uncertainty that are universally resonant. The spectacles in the poem symbolize the tools to perceive reality. The reality changes with the change in tools. But the poem also questions: does overdependence on external aids compromise self-awareness? Ultimately, it gestures toward self-reliance in the search for truth.
- In "Chasing a Dream on the Ganges," a physical and spiritual journey through sacred Indian sites becomes emblematic of the universal quest for meaning in a chaotic world.
- In "Connaught Place," small personal acts—buying a daughter's dress, bargaining for handkerchiefs—are embedded within the larger narrative of Indian modernity, Partition memory, globalization, and urban inclusivity. Connaught Place becomes not just a market, but a microcosm of pluralistic, resilient urban India.

In several poems, historical, political, or cultural concerns are reclaimed through the lens of subjective emotion and voice:

- "The Black Experience" features the persona of someone from the African diaspora, possibly an ex-slave or colonial subject. Though culturally distant, the poem explores racial exclusion, economic marginalization, and survival—universal concerns echoed in many parts of the world.
- In "A Lament," the suicide of a child is not treated as a statistic or social commentary. Instead, it is mourned, relived, and absorbed into the body and memory of a grieving mother. Her voice becomes the vehicle for profound reflection on parenthood, despair, and generational endurance. The moment of suicide becomes an emblem of collective anguish. The personal loss transforms into shared grief, felt viscerally by the reader.

Ultimately, these poems begin in specific bodies, cities, homes, or faiths, but they extend toward shared vulnerabilities—aging, longing, suffering, survival, and spiritual seeking. That is how I see poetry functioning in my work: as a bridge between the private and the public, the individual and the collective, the now and the timeless.

DH5: Let's follow up with another aspect of this personal/universal aspect of poetry. Often we as poets take a personal experience and put it in a context to hopefully connect to a reader and share the experience. How do you see your ideal reader? Who specifically would you hope to reach with your poems?

SKS5: The concept of the "ideal reader" is foundational to both literary theory and poetic praxis. While there is no single universal definition, an ideal reader is not merely someone who decodes the words on the page, but someone who engages with a text imaginatively, ethically, emotionally, and intellectually. Such a reader helps the poem fulfil its fullest aesthetic and philosophical potential.

My understanding of the ideal reader has evolved through an engagement with both Western critical theories and classical Indian poetics. In the West, the centrality of the reader emerged only in the twentieth century, especially as a reaction to formalist approaches. In contrast, Indian thinkers had, from ancient times, emphasized the role of the reader or spectator (*rasika pāṭhaka*, *sahṛdaya darshak*) as essential to the realization of literary meaning.

Let me first briefly outline key Western perspectives. T. S. Eliot emphasized the importance of a "historical sense" — the reader must engage with a poem in the context of literary tradition and intertextual memory. Roland Barthes, in his distinction between the "readerly" and "writerly" texts, identified the ideal reader as a writerly reader — one who co-creates the text through interpretation. Wolfgang Iser introduced the concept of the implied reader—a hypothetical reader who fills in the gaps in a text and actualizes its meaning. For Iser, the ideal reader is an active participant, not a passive receiver. Stanley Fish developed the idea of interpretive communities, arguing that our reading practices are socially shaped. Yet, the ideal reader, for Fish, is

aware of these biases and can navigate them thoughtfully. Cleanth Brooks, a representative of New Criticism, spoke for the close reader, who is alert to the tensions, paradoxes, and ambiguities in a text. M.H. Abrams describes literature as both mirror and lamp, and the ideal reader as someone who reflects life and also receives inner truths. Harold Bloom invokes the notion of the strong reader, especially in poetry, as one who wrestles with the text's originality.

In the 1960s and 70s, particularly in the United States and Germany, Reader-Response Theory emerged as a counterpoint to the formalism of New Criticism. Critics such as Louise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, Stanley Fish, and Wolfgang Iser challenged the formalist idea that literary meaning is solely inherent in the text. They, rather, emphasized that meaning is not embedded solely in the text but is co-created by the reader, shaped by cultural background, personal experience, and emotional orientation. This school redefines the role of the reader from passive receiver to active creator of meaning. Within this framework, the ideal reader is not a single, universal figure but a conceptual position—someone who is fully engaged in the act of meaning-making, consciously or unconsciously.

Though Rosenblatt distinguishes between efferent reading (for information) and aesthetic reading (for experience), Steven Lynn, in *Texts and Contexts*, observes: "For people who rejoice in the diversity of experiences and responses and opinions, reader-response criticism will be especially interesting, not only because of our different orientations and abilities, but also because of the different ways that we partition and perceive our experiences" (p. 86). Critics of this approach, however, worry that it encourages subjectivism, risking an "anything goes" attitude to interpretation. Furthermore, this theory does not discriminate between informed and uninformed readers, nor does it appreciate the expansion of a reader's understanding beyond their initial perspective of a text.

In contrast to these, classical Indian aesthetics, especially as developed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, *Dhvanyāloka*, and *Abhinavabhāratī*, has long foregrounded the importance of the reader as a co-experiencer of *rasa*. Indian theorists conceive of the ideal reader as the *Sahṛdaya Pāṭhaka*—literally, the "like-hearted" or "sensitive" reader. Ānandavardhana, in *Dhvanyāloka* (9th century CE), asserts that *rasa* is not stated directly but suggested (*dhvani*), and it can only be realized by a *Sahṛdaya*. Abhinavagupta, in *Abhinavabhāratī* (10th century CE), refines this concept by describing the *Sahṛdaya* as someone with a purified and empathetic consciousness (*viśuddha-citta*), capable of undergoing the process of *sādhāraṇīkaraṇa* — the universalization of personal emotion into aesthetic experience.

The *Sahṛdaya* reader embodies the following six characteristics:

1. Emotional sensitivity (*bhāva-jñāna*): resonates deeply with the emotions conveyed in poetry.
2. Aesthetic refinement (*rasa-jñatā*): has cultivated taste and poetic literacy to enjoy the nuances of poetic expression.

3. Cultural awareness: understands *dharma*, mythology, symbolism, and literary convention.
4. Empathetic imagination: can enter the emotional and cognitive world of characters.
5. Detachment (*viveka*): maintains aesthetic distance—experiencing grief, horror, or joy aesthetically rather than personally.
6. Universalization (*sādhāraṇīkaraṇa*): transforms individual emotion into a shared, elevated aesthetic response.

In this model, the ideal reader is not just a receptor but a realizer of poetic essence. A poem, however well-crafted, remains incomplete unless its *rasa* (emotion) is experienced by a qualified reader (trained *Sahridya Pathak*). Thus, Indian poetics elevates reading into a deeply emotional, ethical and spiritual process, not just an intellectual one.

In the context of these traditions, my ideal reader is:

- A reader attuned to Indian cultural, political, and spiritual references.
- A reader who can grasp intertextual allusions (to the *Mahabharata*, Langston Hughes, Auden, Kabir, etc.).
- Someone who understands tone, irony, satire, and persona, without flattening meaning into simplistic interpretation (*abhidhā* or literal meaning).
- One who allows the emotional and spiritual voice of poems such as *"A Lament"* or the Bubli series to speak disturbingly and transformatively.

To me, the ideal reader is not a critic or a fan, but a witness, companion, and co-creator. They read not merely to confirm what they already know, but to be transformed—emotionally, intellectually, and ethically. In doing so, they complete the circuit between art and life, writer and world.

DH6: Another thing poetry does well is to, by focusing on something, elevate it and make it special. Odes fall into this category of poetry. *"*Hands" is a beautiful ode to a father, written with a focus on just the father's hands. "Coffee" is both an ode and a meditation. Can you speak to this poem, and to the ability of poetry to elevate its subject?

SKS6: You're absolutely right — poetry often grants significance through focused attention. In *Unwinding Self*, poetry lingers in the ordinary, illuminating the quiet spaces of life with reverence and inquiry. You have rightly identified the poems *"*Hands" and "Coffee" as examples of this approach. Though their subjects — a father's hands and a beverage — could not be more different, both poems perform the same poetic gesture: they elevate the everyday, granting it permanence through memory and philosophical reflection.

In "Hands," something as humble as a father's hands becomes luminous, symbolic, even sacred. The poem doesn't merely describe; it

contemplates, allowing those hands to carry the weight of legacy, labour, and affection. Lines like, "They were not soft hands / but strong, browned, chipped / with the toil of decades," honour the real—not through embellishment but through witness. This is poetry's true power: to transform through attention.

What deepens the poem's impact is that these hands are pedagogical. "They taught me silence, patience, / and how to let go / without leaving." The father's hands are not only physical; they embody quiet masculinity—resilient, nurturing, dignified. The ode becomes a space where unspoken values are passed from one generation to another. By focusing solely on the hands, the poem avoids over-narration and instead creates a space for the reader's own emotional associations. Everyone has seen aging hands. Everyone has remembered a parent's touch. Thus, the personal becomes universal.

All Indian gods are carved with multiple hands, one of which is depicted as blessing the devotees. In Indian poetic traditions, parts of the body — eyes, feet, hands — often symbolize inner states or virtues. *"*Hands" blends this cultural sensitivity with modern, restrained English diction. There is no sentimentality—only clarity. And within that clarity, we find transcendence. The poem becomes not just a memory but a ritual of remembrance, a poetic act of preservation.

Similarly, *"*Coffee" illustrates how poetry can elevate the ordinary into meditation. While it begins as an ode — celebrating aroma, warmth, and texture — it quickly becomes a reflection on life, time, and solitude. Lines like, "As I stirred, I thought of days / that passed like bitter sips," shift the poem from praise to introspection. The coffee cup becomes a mirror; drinking becomes a ritual of contemplation. This dual movement — from object to idea, from outer gesture to inner truth — is where poetry finds its deepest strength. *"*Coffee" enacts what great poetry often does: transforming daily acts into sacred ones. Despite their different subjects, *"*Hands" and "Coffee" share several traits:

- Both focus on a single object or image (a father's hands, a cup of coffee)
- Both move from the material to the metaphysical
- Both celebrate the dignity of the ordinary
- Both evoke emotion through restraint, not sentimentality

In this way, they mirror each other. *"*Coffee" maps memory and solitude; *"*Hands" maps legacy and relationship. One anchors itself in private ritual, the other in familial history. Both offer stillness—an invitation to pause, reflect, and recognize poetry in the mundane. My intention in writing these poems was not to create spectacle but to pay attention. And through attention, the smallest moments become sacred:

> A father's hand becomes a philosophy. A cup of coffee becomes a prayer.

This, to me, is the ethos of *Unwinding Self*—that poetry lies not in grand declarations, but in quiet devotion to life's overlooked rituals. These odes whisper what we often forget: that what is most meaningful is already in our hands, waiting to be seen anew.

DH7: Some of your poems reflect on the human and environmental cost of human greed and willingness to exploit and harm whoever and whatever is necessary for gain — I'm thinking of diamonds and marble mining mentioned in some of your poems. Justice and humanity are themes you worked with throughout this book and your earlier books. How can poetry address the injustices of the world? What is our role as poets in this regard?

SKS7: Thank you for raising this essential question. In his essay, "A Defence of Poetry," Percy Bysshe Shelley says: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" though W. H. Auden writes: "Poetry makes nothing happen: / it survives." The question is why does it survive? One may find the answer in Octavio Paz's following observation: "Poetry is the other voice. Not the voice of history or biography, but the voice of the eternal present." I believe that the act of writing is not merely an aesthetic or intellectual pursuit — it is also an ethical one. In times when both human dignity and the planet are under threat from unchecked greed and systemic apathy, poetry must serve as both witness and conscience. My poetry across the three collections — from *From the Core Within* to *Unwinding Self* — has consistently engaged with questions of justice, be it economic, environmental, gender-based, or existential – and my approach has been humane. Let me talk about some poems in *Unwinding Self*, where the human and environmental costs of exploitation are brought to the fore.

Take the poem "The Fountain Square," for example. On the surface, it describes a familiar urban landscape, but beneath it runs a chilling commentary on the invisible suffering caused by marble mining. When I write, "The white marble around the fountain / Has come from Dungri where / The mother is tracing her lost / Arm and the leg in the quarry," I am invoking not just environmental degradation, but the violence of capitalism — how nature is dismembered, how bodies are consumed for urban beautification. The 'mother' here is both Earth and the labouring woman, and their pain is absorbed into our built environments, unnoticed. Similarly, "A Pond Nearby" documents the desertification of a once-lively ecosystem. The poem shows how environmental loss is also cultural loss. The drying pond becomes a metaphor for a shrinking emotional and imaginative world: "The poet does not have ripples to play with." This single line reflects how ecological crisis is also a poetic crisis. Without water, without birds, without shade, what does imagination cling to?

In poems like "The Kerala Flood 2018" and "Durga Puja in 2013," I try to capture climate crisis and natural calamity not as distant news events but as visceral human experiences. These poems blur the boundary between the spiritual and the ecological. When I ask "Has God vanished abandoning His abode?" I am echoing the anguish of the

helpless citizen who sees both divine silence and governmental failure during a natural disaster. The sacred is polluted, both literally and metaphorically. It compels us to rethink our rituals when the rivers we consider holy are choked with plastic and industrial waste.

Even in quieter poems like "Coffee," a mundane act becomes a meditation on water scarcity and personal helplessness in the face of ecological degradation: "Even the water I am using / Has been saline in taste." This is not just a sensory detail—it reflects a world where even the basic elements of life have become compromised. "Chasing a Dream on the Ganges" engages directly with the degraded state of sacred spaces. The Ganges, while revered, is polluted, and the poem oscillates between devotion and disenchantment. It becomes a powerful critique of how commercialization and spiritual hypocrisy have defiled nature's sanctity.

But justice is not only environmental. It is also social, gendered, and economic. Through persona poems like "Me, A Black Doxy," "The Black Experience," and "Bubli Poems," I try to give voice to the marginalized, the stigmatized, and the silenced. These figures are often women, the poor, or those marked as 'other' by society. In "Me, A Black Doxy," the speaker — a black sex worker — reclaims her dignity with remarkable clarity: "My skin is black / My soul ain't black / My money ain't black / Their acts is black." Here, the poem exposes how society projects its sins onto the weak, while those in power walk free. The voice is defiant, lyrical, and full of spiritual irony. Likewise, "Bubli Poems" trace a village girl's disillusionment in the city—from the seductions of consumerism to the crushing weight of moral hypocrisy and gender policing. Her eventual mental breakdown is not personal failure—it is social failure.

Ben Okri says, "The poet's role is to defeat the invisibility of the real with the violence of illusion." In the poem "Buy Books Not Diamonds," the critique of consumerist greed becomes global and intergenerational. The poem juxtaposes the glittering allure of diamonds with the grim reality of child labour, war economies, and religious complacency: "Kimberlite crushers deafen the children / Who no more can hear the war-cries." It invokes the blood diamond trade and asks what kind of moral blindness allows luxury to coexist with systemic violence. When the poem declares, "Hunger is not dispelled / It stays, it stays, it stays!" —it condemns the global system's failure to prioritize basic human needs over spectacle and profit. This poem positions poetry not just as observation but as resistance against forgetting. Poets are not activists in the conventional sense, but they wield language as intervention. They bear witness, ask inconvenient questions, and resist cultural amnesia. They do not offer simplistic solutions, but they ensure that pain, memory, and injustice are not erased. Derek Walcott puts it beautifully: "The fate of poetry is to fall in love with the world in spite of history."

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o holds: "Writers are the memory of a people." Poetry can elevate the ordinary, but it can also expose the cruelty embedded in normalcy. Therefore, Seamus Heaney's advice that "[t]he poet's voice must be heard as both an echo and a prophecy" should be

paid heed to. Through metaphor, persona, irony, and lyrical restraint, poetry can speak truth to power—sometimes softly, sometimes like thunder. To me, the role of the poet is to be a mirror, a lamp, and sometimes a flame. A mirror that shows society its face. A lamp that gently illuminates the forgotten. A flame that can ignite moral reflection. In this way, poetry becomes more than a record of feeling—it becomes a tool for ethical re-imagination.

DH8: This book is a very questioning book: societal norms, what is just, even questioning God (especially in the poem "The Kerala Flood 2018.") But both this book and your previous book draw on religious themes and traditions, and there is a great spirituality in your work. For you, what is the role of religion in poetry, and also what is the role of poetry in religion?

SKS8: Thank you — your observation captures a crucial tension that runs through all three of my poetry collections. Karl Marx had a complaint about the philosophers: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it." He also grumbled against religion when he wrote: "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." But despite all the efforts of the Marxists to annihilate religiosity among people, religious revivalism all over the world is taking place. Religion and poetry, to me, are not separate domains but deeply interwoven fields of thought and experience. Both are ways of engaging with the mystery of existence, both seek meaning, both grapple with suffering, and both — at their sincerest — refuse to be silent in the face of injustice. Yet, they also function differently: religion often proposes answers, while poetry is more comfortable dwelling within questions, though Aimé Césaire says: "Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge."

Yes, *Unwinding Self* is a deeply questioning book. In his Afterword to the book, Donovan Roebert writes: "It is characteristic of this collection of poems that questions pop up everywhere … These interrogative moments, interspersed throughout the poetic play of open-ended statement, always function to pull us up short: to show that we can never be sure, not only of what we are asserting but also as to the rightness of the kind of questions life imposes on us." *Unwinding Self* does not approach religion as an inherited structure to be revered without scrutiny. Instead, it engages with it as a living, evolving force that must be interrogated in light of human suffering, social injustice, environmental degradation, and the absence or silence of divine agency in moments of crisis. In *"*The Kerala Flood 2018," for example, I juxtapose mythological reverence with human catastrophe. The poem does not abandon faith, but it does demand accountability — not just from human institutions, but from God Himself: "Has God vanished abandoning His abode?" This question may sound audacious, but it arises from anguish, not blasphemy. When people pray to gods amid floods and earthquakes, and when those gods remain silent,

poetry becomes the only medium through which this silence can be broken — or at least held in tension. That is where I see the religious potential of poetry.

Across *Unwinding Self*, as well as in *The Door is Half Open* and *From the Core Within*, I have consistently used religious imagery not to enforce orthodoxy, but to expose its limitations, explore its ethical roots, and expand its emotional resonance. Religion, in my poems, functions as:

1. A cultural and mythic reservoir: I draw extensively from Hindu and Indian religious traditions—mythology, sacred geography (like the Ganges), festivals, epics, and ritual language. This serves not as an ornament but as a symbolic framework to explore modern issues. Poems like "Durga Puja in 2013," "Chasing A Dream on the Ganges," "Akshya Trity," "Ram Setu," and "Ganga Mata – A Prayer" fuse ancient beliefs with urgent moral dilemmas—be they about environmental ruin or political hypocrisy.
2. A space of moral confrontation: the need for a religion in my work is never unquestioned. I often hold a mirror to ritualistic, performative, or commercialized religion that has lost touch with its ethical essence. In this way, I echo Indian poet-saints like Kabir, who challenged both organized religion and social injustice using the language of devotion.
3. A voice of the dispossessed: in persona poems like "Me, A Black Doxy," "The Destitute," or "Bubli Poems," religion is present in the background—not as an institutional power, but as a contested space. These characters don't reject faith, but they question its gatekeepers, demanding inclusion and justice.
4. A language of irony and empathy: at times, I employ religious idiom with irony—like in "Buy Books Not Diamonds," where Christian and Islamic references sit beside images of global greed and child exploitation. Yet even in irony, there is empathy, a desire to retrieve the spiritual from the cynical.

Turning my attention to the last part of the question, "the role of poetry in religion," I would like to point out that all religious books are poetical compositions, be it the *Vedas* or the *Bible*; all religious hymns are poetry and all saint poets have been good poets. Thus, one can see poetry as having a vital role within religion:

1. Poetry as ethical voice: where religion sometimes asks for obedience, poetry demands integrity. Poetry allows me to speak from inside the tradition, but also to challenge its ethical lapses. "Chasing A Dream on the Ganges" and "Kabir's Chadar" may be cited as examples. The line between sacred and profane is not fixed—poetry crosses it to ask: What is truly divine? What is truly human?
2. Poetry as spiritual ecology: in many poems, from "A Pond Nearby" to "Durga Puja in 2013," I treat the environment as

> sacred. Rivers, birds, trees, even decaying urban spaces all become part of a moral-spiritual ecology. When we pollute rivers or ignore floods, we violate not just nature but *dharma* itself.

If I may borrow comparisons: like Arun Kolatkar, I explore religious spaces to reveal hypocrisy — but I also allow for moments of genuine spiritual yearning. Kolatkar strips down religion; I question it but sometimes return to it for solace. Like A.K. Ramanujan, I link tradition to personal memory, interrogating patriarchal norms and forgotten histories through a subtle, compassionate voice.

In essence, religion in my poetry is not about gods who sit on distant thrones. It is about how we live, how we suffer, how we seek, and how we treat one another. It is both a burden and a balm. And poetry, for me, is the bridge between the seen and the unseen, the spoken and the silenced. Through it, I can pray, protest, and prophesy—all in a single line. As I see it, poetry and religion are united in their highest purpose: to remind us of what is sacred, especially when the world forgets.

DH9: I very much enjoyed the physical and spiritual journey you take the reader on in the poem "Chasing a Dream on the Ganges." Would you speak more about this journey, and how to create a poem that captures an experience?

SKS9: Thank you — it's gratifying to hear that the poem resonated with you. "Chasing a Dream on the Ganges" is indeed both a spiritual quest and a poetic reconstruction of lived experience. It arose from my travels to sacred places associated with the Ganga — Haridwar, Rishikesh, Devprayag, and Gangotri — but more importantly, it emerged from a restless longing for meaning that these places evoke. The poem is structured as a gradual, ascending movement — through sacred geographies, emotional memory, and existential reflection. It's not a straightforward pilgrimage; it's an inner quest marked by disorientation, yearning, irony, and, occasionally, fleeting clarity.

The poem begins not with a plan, but with a feeling — disquiet, anticipation, and a sense of incompleteness. The persona isn't sure whether he is following the river or whether the river is following him. That ambiguity becomes the pulse of the poem. It moves through space — temples, ashrams, ghats — but it is always circling back to something internal: Why is he here? What is he looking for? Why does this place not give him peace? The journey is deliberately non-linear. Each part reflects a different state of being: spiritual hunger in the first section, cultural disorientation in the second, anxiety and absurdity in the third, and a kind of quiet humility in the last. Along the way, the poem critiques the commercialization of pilgrimage, the noise that pollutes silence, and the difficulty of truly meditating even in sacred spaces. And yet, despite all this, there is beauty — the kind that creeps up in bird calls, mountain light, and the memories that surface unbidden.

In *Section I*, the poem opens with restlessness. The speaker asks: "What draws me back to the sacred in the dead of night?" Is it love, forgiveness, guilt, or something deeper? This section is intimate and pleading — there is vulnerability, even confusion, in returning to something sacred that also seems to wound. Ending with the image of standing in rags against divine rage on the bank of the Alaknanda, the speaker enacts the classic paradox of spiritual longing: that the soul often seeks grace in the places it feels most abandoned. Section II maps a physical journey from Avantika Temple to Mansa Devi, and onwards to Parmarth Ashram, Swarga Ashram, and Devprayag. But as the geography expands, so does the uncertainty: "Do I follow the Ganga, or does it follow me?" The speaker deliberately chooses not to walk in the footsteps of Bhagiratha — the legendary prince who brought the Ganges down — but instead seeks Alkapuri, a less travelled, mythical route. This expresses my personal sense that modern spiritual seekers often walk parallel to tradition, not within it. The voices of ritual and mythology — "people were shouting halleluiahs" — surround the speaker, yet he stands apart, unsure why he's even there. That tension between belonging and questioning runs through the poem. In Section III, the poem becomes more satirical and reflective. The speaker moves upstream, seeking silence for penance — but all he finds is noise: "honking, whizzing, chaos." Even the revered Har Ki Pauri fails him. When he moves to Ram Jhula, the fear of a collapsing bridge replaces reverence. Even Sivananda Ashram, a symbol of yogic serenity, offers no peace — just playful monkeys. By the time he reaches Devprayag, the confluence of Bhagirathi and Alaknanda, the place is awe-inspiring — but even here the mantra disappears. That vanishing mantra is symbolic. It reflects how external pilgrimage often fails to quiet internal turbulence. Even at the holiest point, the speaker is not yet ready for surrender. Section IV provides a tonal shift. It is dawn. For the first time, there is stillness. The speaker witnesses the sunrise over the Kanchanjunga, and the metaphor broadens — from ritual geography to nature and memory. The pine tree becomes a veil, hiding the mountain — just as our worldly attachments often obscure the higher truth. A bird's movement from branch to branch becomes a metaphor for his life — from childhood to now. Here, the poem moves from external pursuit to internal reckoning. The speaker doesn't find spiritual transcendence, but he wakes up — literally and metaphorically. That, too, is a kind of grace. Ultimately, "Chasing a Dream on the Ganges" is not about reaching a spiritual destination — it's about realising that the dream itself is in the chase, in the ongoing seeking. The river is not just outside — it flows through one's memory, through silence, through absence, and perhaps through the poem itself.

As for how one captures an experience in poetry — I would say it starts with deep attentiveness. It's not enough to describe what happened; the poet must tune in to what the moment meant, how it felt, let the moment linger, let it question and connect to broader truths. The poem only takes shape when one stops trying to impose a lesson on the experience and simply let the journey speak — through the weather,

the landscape, the inner turbulence, the fatigue, the fleeting joy. In this poem, the Ganga is not just a river; it becomes a metaphor for the shifting self, for aspiration, for disillusionment, and for grace. The locations are real, but they are also psychological and symbolic spaces. Poetry allows contradictions to live together — devotion and doubt, memory and myth, longing and irony. Craft-wise, I tried to write with restraint, suggestiveness, and internal rhythm. I allowed the voice to question, to falter, to move without resolution. I think that's important when trying to convey lived experience — you don't always know the meaning while you're living it. Sometimes the poem knows before you do. Poetry, then, becomes a space for both recording and discovering. So, this journey — like most genuine spiritual journeys — is unfinished. But the act of writing made me feel I had paused long enough to listen. And that is often where poetry begins. It will not be out of place to quote Adrienne Rich who wrote: "The moment of change is the only poem."

DH10: "A Gush of Wind" reminds me of the poetry of Tomas Tranströmer, who is one of my favourite poets. And a few of your images, such as in "The Unborn Poem," remind me of the magical realists (images being boiled, a tank above the sky, traffic jam of emotions, wind personified, continents having stomachs, etc.). Who are you reading these days, and who are your literary influences?

SKS10: Thank you very much for your kind words and for drawing such thoughtful parallels. Your reference to Tomas Tranströmer, the Swedish Nobel Laureate, was both surprising and illuminating. I must confess that I was not deeply familiar with his poetry before, but reading it after your suggestion has made me understand the resonance you've pointed to.

Tranströmer's ability to express interior states through external imagery, his quiet spiritual epiphanies, and his preference for suggestive minimalism mirror the emotional movement in "A Gush of Wind." In that poem, what begins as a mundane experience — closing windows against a storm — evolves into an allegory for vulnerability, transformation, and acceptance. Tranströmer, too, often locates profound inner shifts in the backdrop of a landscape, a house, or even silence. Like him, I attempt to show that external events (a gust of wind, a broken latch, a closed door) may be metaphors for deeply personal or spiritual realisations.

I see poetry — especially in *Unwinding Self* — as a space to reimagine metaphors as events, and emotions as landscapes. If that aligns my work in any way with the traditions of magical realism, then it's a deeply humbling connection. Magical realism — as practiced by writers like Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Salman Rushdie, and Ben Okri — blends the surreal with the ordinary, without offering explicit justification. Your comparison with magical realism in "The Unborn Poem" was especially rewarding. In my poem, a leaking tank in the sky, images being boiled with rhyme and cookies, and the idea that an epitaph may precede a poem all reflect the surreal

logic of magical realism. They are not arbitrary inventions, but metaphors rooted in psychological, linguistic, and cultural anxieties — especially around the act of poetic creation.

Whereas magical realism treats the supernatural as ordinary, "The Unborn Poem" treats poetic failure as a metaphysical crisis. Here's how I see the convergence:

Aspect	**Magical Realists**	**My Work**
Blurring literal/ symbolic	Ghosts and saints appear naturally	Tea, plumbing, windows as poetic devices
Philosophical surrealism	Time bends, logic loops	The poem dies before it's born
Critique of systems	Empire, bureaucracy, religion	Literary convention, creative paralysis
Mythifying the mundane	Recipes, laundry, weeping skies	Afternoon tea, traffic of emotions
Temporal Disruption	Past-present-future fluidity	Epitaph precedes poem

Your question also prompts me to reflect on my current literary influences. At present, I'm revisiting works associated with the syllabi we've newly designed for postgraduate students. These include readings in Sanskrit poetics, Bhakti traditions, contemporary Indian writing, and even Film Studies. Classical Indian theorists like Bharata, Anandavardhana, and Abhinavagupta influence the way I understand suggestion (*dhvani*), mood (*rasa*), and the role of the sensitive reader (*sahridaya*). Philosophically, the Upanishadic and Vedantic metaphysics continue to shape how I view image, identity, and illusion.

Thus, whether through Tranströmer's translucent metaphysics or magical realism's emotional surrealism, I remain drawn to writers who are able to stretch language to its breaking point, to arrive at some deeper truth—not always explainable, but always felt.

Once again, thank you for this deeply enriching connection. I would not have arrived at it without your lens.

DH11: The book ends with a series of haikus entitled "Stories from the Mahabharata." Why did you choose this form? How does a haiku, a very short form, interact with the original epic long-form poem?

SKS11: That's a very perceptive question—thank you. The decision to end *Unwinding Self* with a series of haiku-like poems was both deliberate and contemplative. The *Mahabharata*, as you know, is one of the world's longest and most layered epics, steeped in moral ambiguity, spiritual inquiry, and human drama. Choosing to respond to that vastness with the shortest possible poetic form—a series of compact three-line poems—was not intended as a contradiction, but as a kind of homage. It's an attempt to distil the epic rather than to diminish it. It is generally accepted in literary theory, particularly due

to Ānandavardhana's commentary, that the dominant Rasa (emotion) of the Mahabharata is Shanta Rasa, the emotion of tranquillity and detachment, achieved through the eventual cessation of desires, even though other emotions are present. In the Western tradition it is something like what Milton in his *Samson Agonistes* describes as "Calm of mind all passion spent." So, ending a book at the moment of tranquillity is what is desired. In Indian tradition we say having read a book the reader should be in a state of liberation (Moksha), leading to a sense of inner peace and detachment from worldly concerns, rather than an emotion experienced by the characters themselves.

While the classical Japanese haiku traditionally follows a 5–7–5 syllable pattern and focuses on seasonal or natural imagery, my poems are "haiku-like" only in spirit. They are not bound to that form but are built on the haiku's core virtues—brevity, clarity, and resonance. They operate more like epic epigrams, deeply rooted in Indian mythology, sometimes narrative, often meditative, and always driven by ethical insight.

The tension between the *Mahabharata*'s epic scale and the compressed form of these verses was intentional. Just as the *Bhagavad Gita* distils the entire philosophical and ethical conflict of the *Mahabharata* into a single dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, my aim was to create poetic equivalents—brief, potent, image-rich moments that provoke deeper reflection. Take, for instance, a stanza from the sequence:

The toddler needs milk.
The mother fools him.
The teacher turns a tutor.

These lines attempt to encapsulate Drona's change of fate, his love for his son, the helplessness of poverty-stricken parents, and his stance on dharma and time—in just three lines. It's not merely a reduction; it's a lens, focused sharply on the emotional and symbolic intensity of a scene.

These micro-poems are in line with Indian literary traditions, too. In Indian tradition, we have short but powerful verses, the *sutra* literature, — like the Sanskrit *Subhashitas*, the *Tirukkural* from Tamil literature, and the sayings of Bhakti saints. These short forms carry deep wisdom in just a few lines. In the Western canon, they find kinship with Emily Dickinson's miniatures, Ezra Pound's imagist fragments, William Blake's proverbs, and modern micro-poetry. This style of poetry isn't foreign to India either. So, in a way, the *Mahabharata* haikus(?) are part of that tradition too.

Several impulses shaped my decision to use this form:

1. To compress the infinite into the immediate: much like a mantra, these poems are meant to carry depth in a single breath.
2. To invite contemplation over narration: they don't retell the story; they evoke a moment or a dilemma.

3. To shift from grandeur to intimacy: after poems that tackle history and politics, these short pieces offer meditative stillness.
4. To reframe the epic for the modern reader: in our era of fragmentation and short attention spans, these poems open accessible doors into the moral labyrinths of the *Mahabharata*.
5. To align with poetic maturity: a Sanskrit maxim says[4]: "The saving of a syllable is celebrated like the birth of a son according to grammarians." (*ardhmatalaghven putrotsvam manyate vaiyakarnah* *अर्धमात्रालाघवेन पुत्रोत्सवम् मन्यन्ते वैयाकरणाः* / Nagesh Bhatt's *Paribhashendu Shekharah*). At another place, it has been written "To shorten even a single syllable in a poem and get it right gives the poet as much joy as the birth of a child." (*Mātrālāghavaṁ nāma kaveḥ putrasukhaṁ smṛtam "मात्रालाघवं नाम कवेः पुत्रसुखं स्मृतम्"* This idea appears in several texts including, Bhāmaha's *Kāvyālaṅkāra*. To me, it captures the joy of fine-tuning the smallest poetic gesture. I think that's the spirit behind these sutra-poems.

So, while my poems aren't haiku in the classical Japanese sense, they are haiku-inspired sutras—moments of moral pause, spiritual stillness, and philosophical reflection. Each is a drop of *rasa*, a capsule of *dharma*, and a mirror of inner turmoil. They invite the reader not just to revisit the *Mahabharata*, but to re-feel it — one moment, one moral flashpoint at a time.

So, really, these short poems are meant to distil, not diminish. Each one is a kind of emotional or ethical spark. You don't need to read the entire *Mahabharata* to feel its weight—sometimes, a few carefully chosen words are enough to make it resonate.

DH12: What advice do you give your students who write poetry?

SKS12: I believe you want me to speak directly to the aspiring poets in your classroom. To be honest, most of what I might say has already been expressed — often more eloquently —by my predecessors. Still, let me share a few thoughts.

Before beginning to write, a poet should reflect on his/her purpose. For instance, before writing a poem on angst, the poet should ask him/herself: Is the angst too personal to express? Is the aim to bear witness to a social injustice? Or to seek beauty in the ordinary? The poet should also consider the language best suited to express it. Angst may be expressed in raw language in everyday life. But, such expression may not resonate as poetry with readers. Language, therefore, matters — it must be fitting for both the message and the medium.

In his *On Liberty* John Stuart Mill writes: "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that." Matthew Arnold once remarked, "He does not know English literature who only English literature knows." Similarly, Max Müller, in *Science of Religions*,

arrived at the intellectual conviction that "all higher knowledge is gained by comparison and rests on comparison." One should not only be aware of different traditions especially in a pluralistic, multilingual and multicultural society where diverse narrative styles flourish but one should also decide the tradition one wishes to be part of. Such a choice shapes a poet's craft. Being rooted in one's culture, mythology, geography, and personal surroundings adds depth. Yet, it is equally important to engage with global trends and learn from the masters. The narrative styles and strategies of different communities vary significantly. For example, a bird could be viewed and described in a thousand ways by people from different locations and backgrounds. Several poets (at least 20) have composed poems on a skylark; each of those poems is different in theme, style, and emotion. One often draws from immediate realities: a classroom, a riverbank, a train station, a family conversation. To relate to the immediacy of the situation, the poet should find something new in it, something that will resonate with the reader. In other words, one should try to find truth in the local, instead of just describing the scene or mimicking a distant voice. Remember, God is not in the hymn — the hymn is just a means to reach the divine. One enters a dialogue with God through a hymn. A hymn is also a space to express spiritual honesty, not just reverence.

When one reads a lot across cultures and centuries, one may lose one's voice and become imitative in themes, language and techniques. At times, the mix of the two does not work. To borrow a metaphor from drinking: a poet should develop his/her own unique concoctions to create an impact. One must stay grounded in one's own linguistic and cultural paradigms to explore the truth. The balance between global and local is not taught in books — it's learned through lived experience.

There is an essential difference between the language of prose and poetry. Poets and critics over the ages have been discussing these issues but so far, no consensus has emerged. New forms continue to evolve disregarding earlier notions and conventions. However, the differences in prose and poetry speak for themselves. The right image can carry more weight than a hundred arguments. Since poetry often evokes aesthetic emotion through concentrated language and imagery, poetry invites the reader to pause, reread, and interpret multiple layers of meaning, often rewarding close reading with deeper insight.

Much of contemporary poetry is heavily self-focused. No doubt one is important to oneself but the fact remains that much of the world lies outside one's self. Why should anyone else (the other) care about your worries, obsessions, miseries, and attitudes, when the world is so vast and filled with concerns far beyond the self? Therefore, try to write beyond the self and try to see poetry as a form of social testimony. In doing so, aim to amplify unheard voices in your poetry.

Brevity intensifies meaning. A long poem can fail where a single stanza sings. Always try to cut excess, trust the pause and let silence do its work. In short, the following are my tips:

1. Be honest. Write what you feel, not what you're supposed to feel.
2. Start small. A drop of truth is better than a sea of imitation.
3. Don't be afraid to question — even yourself.
4. Let your poem be a door. Half open, but inviting.
5. Find your own form — long or short, modern or traditional — and bend it to your need.
6. Speak up — for those who can't.
7. Remember: the poem is not finished until it surprises you.

DH13: There are seven "Afterwords" to this collection, provided by scholars from around the world. This is quite unusual. What purpose do they serve?

SKS13: Yes, I agree with you, the inclusion of seven "Afterwords" in *Unwinding Self* is a unique experiment. It is true that a good poetry book can and should stand on its own. As a matter of fact, in my first collection, *From the Core Within*, there was none. But this does not mean that it was the best collection. Neither was there any Preface from the poet in it. It was just a collection of the poems. Still, the book was largely appreciated both in India and abroad and it attracted more than thirty reviews. The same have been collected in a book form, *Bricks and Bouquets* (ed. Sanjeev Kumar). Generally, in India new poets are not paid attention to and there is a lack of good critical material on Indian poetry in English in general. So, I thought, won't it be a good idea if the readers are familiar with the response of the readers along with the poems. This might help them in evaluating the poems and shaping their own judgments about the poems. Therefore, in the second collection, *The Door is Half Open*, I tried to append at least one review/ opinion from each continent. Finally, six reviews, one each from the UK, France, Japan, India, Canada, and South Africa were appended to the book. Two of them were from universities and others were from practicing poets. Only the Indian critic, a very senior academic, a poet and translator himself, largely did not like the poems. This led to a natural curiosity as to why my work was getting praised outside India. The readers and the reviewers by and large appreciated this move. A brief look at different commentators will make it amply clear how different readers sitting far away from each other and far away from the poet respond to poetry. So, I decided to stick to this format in *Unwinding Self* as well. Hence, the seven Afterwords from different corners of the world find a way into the book. Strictly speaking, they are not required. But with the inclusion of these reader-responses, an academic exercise is also being undertaken. Some Afterwords are scholarly; others are deeply personal. This diversity of tone helps non-specialist readers navigate the book with guidance and reflection. These multiple lenses encourage the prospective readers to engage the text from different angles. In fact, in India there is a long tradition of *tikas* (commentaries) on the text; we consider these commentaries to be as important as the text itself. It shall not be out of place to mention a legendary story about the contentious literary

relationship between a leading critic (Mammata) and a prominent creative writer (Shriharsha) in India. Acharya Mammata (1090 – 1160 AD), an authority in the field of Sanskrit poetics and literary criticism, is believed to be the maternal uncle of Sriharsha, a Sanskrit poet and philosopher renowned for his philosophical work *Khaṇḍanakhaṇḍanakhādya* (*Sweets of Refutation*) and the epic poem *Naiṣadhacarita* (one of the five epics in Sanskrit). Mamata's *Kavyaprakasha* (*Light of Poetry*) is a foundational text in Sanskrit poetics and literary criticism, covering aspects like the definition of poetry, the nature of poetic beauty, and the rules of literary composition. The eighth chapter ("*Ullasa"*) of this treatise systematically categorizes and explains various blemishes that can affect the quality of poetry. It is said that to get an opinion from the established authority on poetics, Sriharsha eagerly presented his magnum opus *Naiṣadhacarita* (composed in ornate style) to Mammata who had just completed *Kavyaprakasha*. After reviewing the poem, Mammata is said to have commented that had he seen this text earlier, he could have saved himself a great deal of effort as it provided numerous examples of poetic flaws (*doshas*) that he had painstakingly documented in his own work, *Kavyaprakash*. The hurt Sriharsha retorted by saying, *काव्यप्रकाशो यवनो यस्यासौ यवनी स्वयं।* (*Kavyaprakaso yavani yasyaasau yavani svayam*, English meaning: "The Kavyaprakasha is a barbarian, and poetry is a delicate woman. It is a shame that she is stuck with such an insensitive person, and her pain knows no bounds.") The story, regardless of its historical accuracy, is a good example of the relationship between the reader's response and the poet's artistic creation. I was following the footsteps of Sriharsha in seeking the opinion of various modern Mammatas who evaluated the text from various slants.

Seven critics from five regions[5] sketch *Unwinding Self* as a kaleidoscope where Indian myth and modern crisis, satire and devotion, mortality and hope refract into a single, irresistibly human light. These readings indicate that *Unwinding Self* is read as a polyphonic work, where laughter and lament, myth and modernity, birdsong and social anger echo from Prayagraj to Madrid, Hermanus to Rzeszów, Christchurch to Dar es Salaam and Kokrajhar to Vinnytsia:

- To feminist eyes it is a river of women's unheard voices.
- To the modernist it is a labyrinth of unanswered questions.
- To the post-colonial moralist, it is a dossier on injustice and faith.
- To the crafts person it is a toolbox of image, cadence, and wit.
- To the mortality minded phenomenologist, it is a quiet guide through fragility.
- To the Indian insider it is a dharmic mirror, reflecting and rebuking a society in flux.
- To the ethically alert aesthete, it is a canvas of conscience, where beauty and resistance blend into one.

Taken together, the seven perspectives plot a critical constellation as varied as the poet's own "forms, feelings, and ideas," confirming the collection's power to resonate across cultures, theories, and personal histories. They confirm that *Unwinding Self* invites every reader to "unwind" the self—culturally, ethically, and spiritually—and restitch it into a more alert, compassionate fabric of being.

The Afterwords represent a global and multicultural readership. Their inclusion signals that a poem resonates beyond national borders: the Indian English voice is globally relevant, an international conversation on poetry, justice, and identity is possible. This is especially important in Indian English literature, where poets often feel regionally respected but globally unheard.

By not giving my own prefatory note but including seven Afterwords, I am not insisting on the sole authority or insisting that my work is to be read only in a particular manner. I believe that once the words are in the public domain they become people's property and they are free to interpret the work as they feel like. This also indicates that I respect the global literary community and value their opinion. I believe that meaning of a literary piece is co-created by writer, reader, and critic. In many ways, the seven Afterwords echo the form of my poem "Chasing a Dream on the Ganges" — a solitary journey that becomes collective through witnessing. In fact, many Bhakti poets like Kabir or Tukaram were passed down through layers of interpretation, glosses, and *sampradayas*. In the Western tradition too, the book reviews and the interpretations of the poems at several hands is quite common. The use of Afterwords echoes this layered, intertextual, and interpretive tradition. T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was published with Eliot's footnotes — framing the poem as academic and interpretive. The detailed glossary in the book may be viewed in the same light. Many poetry anthologies have very detailed Introductions and sometimes include multiple commentaries. Though rare, this model does have precedents.

Some readers might feel that excessive criticism dilutes the poetic voice. However, my feeling is that rather than diluting, it deepens the experience — especially for those readers who are interested in knowing how poems are read across cultures, how Indian English poetry is received globally and how poems serve as mirrors of society, not just of self. They provide a framing device that situates the poet within the landscape of Indian English poetry — not just as a writer, but as a cultural interlocutor. The Afterwords do not dictate meaning—they multiply it. Rather than narrowing the reader's view, they expand the landscape, offering interpretive trails without fencing off the terrain.

The seven Afterwords in *Unwinding Self* are not decorative or redundant. They are part of my poetic vision: one of plurality, conversation, and openness. Just as the poems speak to gods, rivers, and nations, the Afterwords let the world speak back. This model invites future poets and critics of Indian English poetry to treat the book not merely as a product but as a conversation — one that grows

through plural readings, international dialogues, and layered co-creation of meaning.

DH14: Could you describe the international community surrounding Indian English Poetry (IEP) and how important the international poetry community is for English poetry in general?

SKS14: Indian poetry in English is a product of the British colonial regime. It came into existence when the British started translating Indian classics into English and English became a medium of literary expression for the educated Indians. Máire ní Fhlathúin has collected and edited these poems in the two volumes of *The Poetry of British India* (Pickering & Chatto, 2011). Another important work is Mary Ellis Gibson's *Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India, 1780–1913: A Critical Anthology* (Ohio University Press, 2011). The term "British-Indian poetry" also came into existence for the poetry of this period though it did not become very popular. For the literature thus produced, Salman Rushdie in the introduction to his anthology *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing* has used several appellations viz. Indo-Anglian, Indo-English, Indian writing in English, English-language Indian writing, English-language Literature, Indian [poetry] in English and for the contributors, Indian writers working in English, English-language writer of Indian origin and non-English-language Indian writers (1997:x-xxii). This literature has been paid attention to since the time it came into existence. Edward Farley Oaten, James Payn and Alfred Comyn Lyall come to my mind as its earliest critics. In fact, very serious studies of Indian poetry in English undertaken in Western universities are almost a century old. The following PhD theses prove my contention: S. Ray's "Anglo-Indian Poetry" (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 1929), Byram Khusroo Talookdar's "A Survey of Indo-Anglian Poetry, from the Beginning to the Present Time" (Unpublished Ph D thesis, Trinity College Dublin. 1935) and Marie O'Loughlin's "The Birth and Growth of Indo-Anglian Literature and its Contributions to English Literature" (Unpublished Ph D thesis, University of the Pacific, 1935). However, during the Post-Rushdie times Indian literature, particularly fiction, has been paid attention to more seriously.

The international community around Indian English Poetry is both diverse and vital. It includes poets, scholars, translators, critics, and editors from across the world—particularly from countries like the UK, the US, Germany, Italy, Australia, and even parts of Africa and Eastern Europe. Some of the names that come to mind are: George Sampson, Mary C Sturgeon, James Payn, John B. Alphonso-Karkala, Daniela Rogobete, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, W S Thomson, James Cousins, Lucio De Capitani, Günther S. Hintz, Heinz Werner Wessler, Claus Peter Zoller, Hans Harder, Christoph Senft, Angelika Malinar, Pier Paolo Piciucco, Lothar Lutze, Laetitia Zecchini, Dieter Riemenschneider, Christopher Okemwa, Carole Rozzonelli, Makrand Paranjpe, Asun López-Varela, Debjani Chatterjee, and Alessandro Monti. The journals like *Wasafiri, Modern Poetry in Translation*

(MPT), World Literature Today, Poetry International, Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature, Transnational Literature, Cha: An Asian Literary Journal, South Asian Review, and *Indialogs* have been encouraging Indian poetry in English. Some of the most important books on Indian poetry in English have been produced by the scholars settled abroad. They include books by such scholars as Bruce King, John Oliver Perry, E. Dawson Varughese, Jeet Thayil and Ranjan Ghosh.

Over the years these critics have used various tools to assess Indian poetry in English. They, currently, engage with Indian English poetry through lenses like—postcolonial studies, eco-poetics, comparative literature, and transnational aesthetics, among others. This global community is not just a passive audience; it's a space of deep critical engagement. For instance, Indian poets writing in English are often reviewed, translated, or taught in academic settings abroad. International journals and anthologies regularly include their work, and diaspora poets act as cultural connectors, keeping Indian voices alive in conversations happening far beyond national boundaries.

More broadly, the international poetry community is essential for the growth of English poetry itself. English is no longer confined to its native geographies — it's a language shaped by multiple histories and cultures. Indian English poetry contributes to that richness with its unique blend of myth, politics, spirituality, and contemporary urgency. When these poems enter a global dialogue — whether through festivals, translations, or academic critique — they don't just gain visibility; they evolve. This exchange challenges poets to be more alert, more expansive, and more ethically rooted. It ensures that English poetry, as a global phenomenon, stays vibrant, plural, and open to voices that might once have been marginal.

The international poetry community plays a crucial role in shaping, supporting, and elevating Indian English Poetry (IEP) on several fronts. International poetry festivals like The Poetry with Prakriti Festival (Chennai), International Poetry Fest (Trois-Rivières), South Asian Diaspora Poetry Festival (Austin), Ars Poetica (Slovakia), European Poetry Festival (Norwich), Poetry International Festival (Rotterdam), Helicon Poetry Festival (Israel), Struga Poetry Evenings (Macedonia), Kistrech International Poetry Festival (Kenya), Curtea de Argeş Poetry Nights (Romania) and many others have helped many an unknown Indian voices in positioning their works within a global poetic world. The international poetry community helps Indian poets move beyond national or regional readerships, enables critical engagement across cultural boundaries, and situates Indian voices in global poetic conversations around form, identity, justice, aesthetics, and decolonization. International platforms offer Indian poets legitimacy and prestige beyond their often-neglected position within Indian academia or publishing. Inclusion in global anthologies, festivals, and journals helps Indian English poets become part of the world's literary memory. For example, Tishani Doshi's frequent inclusion in Poetry Review, Granta, and Poetry (Chicago) exemplifies how Indian poets are increasingly shaping Anglophone lyric discourse

with hybrid styles that blend classical Indian aesthetics with contemporary bodily and ecological poetics. Global circulation turns isolated talent into world literature. Engagement with global readers and critics fosters new interpretations, comparisons, and thematic resonances—between Indian experiences and other postcolonial, diasporic, or minority traditions. There is a relative scarcity of sustained critical attention to poetry within India's literary ecosystem (which privileges fiction and non-fiction). International scholars and journals provide rigorous frameworks—postcolonial theory, comparative poetics, ecocriticism, feminism, etc.—to interpret Indian English poetry.

Exposure to global poetic styles and forms emboldens Indian poets to innovate with voice, idiom, and form, blending native traditions with global ones (e.g., ghazals with free verse, myth with modernism). The international poetry community functions not only as a receptive audience but also as an interpretive collaborator in the journey of Indian English poetry. It amplifies the polyphony of Indian voices, challenges aesthetic insularity, and fosters a mutually enriching literary dialogue. English is the mother tongue of only 0.02 % of the Indian population; only 6.835% of the total Indian population use it as their second language, and 3.765% of the total Indian population use it as their third language. These are the figures based on the 2011 census. In this light, without international platforms, Indian English poetry risks being celebrated only in islands and neglected at home. In short, global critics and venues act as both megaphone and tuning fork—amplifying Indian English voices while refining them through transnational dialogue.

DH15: Why should we read work from outside our immediate local community?

SKS15: That's an important question—especially in times when many readers gravitate toward voices that reflect their own realities. There is a prayer in the oldest book of the world, *Rig Veda* (1.89.1) saying, "Let noble thoughts come to us from every side" (*ā no bhadrāḥ kratavo yantu viśvato* *आ नो भद्राः क्रतवो यन्तु विश्वतो*). I believe reading literature from outside one's immediate community is vital for several reasons, both intellectual and ethical.

First, it fosters empathy and perspective-taking. Literature allows us to inhabit experiences very different from our own—to see through the eyes of someone from another country, gender, class, or belief system. This enlarges our moral imagination and makes us more aware of the diversity of human experience. In a sense, literature becomes a form of ethical training—it teaches us how to live alongside others, not merely among those who are like us. Reading outside our cultural framework shows us that our assumptions, values, and aesthetic preferences are not universal. Encountering unfamiliar belief systems, literary forms, or narrative structures invites us to question the centrality of our own worldview, making space for dialogue rather than dominance. For

instance, reading Japanese haiku or Arabic qasidas forces us to rethink what constitutes poetic economy or emotional expression.

Second, it helps break the echo chamber. Every community — however rich or plural—has its blind spots. Reading from beyond our own context challenges assumptions we might not even realize we hold. It introduces us to alternative truths, unfamiliar dilemmas, and different ways of organizing thought and value. In an age of migration, climate crisis, digital interconnection, and cultural contact, understanding diverse worldviews is essential. Literature becomes a form of soft diplomacy: it trains us to listen before we speak, to enter into dialogue with nuance and respect.

Third, it expands our cultural and literary literacy. In an interconnected world, global awareness is not optional. Engaging with literatures from other traditions equips us to participate more responsibly in global conversations. It also enriches our own writing and thinking by exposing us to new styles, structures, and metaphors. Some of the most exciting literary innovations have emerged from cross-cultural reading — think of Eliot drawing on Sanskrit texts, or Kamala Das blending confessional poetry with Malayalam idioms. Reading work from other cultures — even in English translation — teaches us how language carries cultural weight, connotation, and rhythm. It helps us appreciate what is lost, gained, or transformed in translation—and this deepens our understanding of both language and identity.

Fourth, reading globally helps decentre dominant narratives. It resists the idea that literary value resides only in Western classics of the Global North or mainstream national voices. It validates stories from the margins — be they Dalit, diasporic, African, Indigenous, or working-class — and insists that these voices belong in the canon of human experience. Just as provincial politics can be narrow and defensive, so can provincial literary taste. Reading across cultures counters the idea that "only certain styles or genres are good," encouraging openness to multiple aesthetics — be it oral storytelling, magical realism, or postmodern minimalism. Had Vikram Seth not been familiar with Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin's *Eugene Onéguine [Onegin]* (1830), a book like *The Golden Gate* (1986) would not have been born. Similarly, J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) could not have been possible without Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724). When we read texts from different traditions — say, the *Bhagavad Gita* alongside the *Iliad*, or Kalidasa with Shakespeare — we begin to see themes, archetypes, and anxieties echoed across time and space. This comparative habit sharpens critical thinking and enriches literary analysis and creativity.

Ultimately, I'd say reading beyond one's locality is not a luxury — it's a responsibility. It has been indicated earlier that he who only knows his own tradition knows nothing. Bhartṛhari, the Indian-linguistic, philosopher and poet (5th century CE) has made plea for open-mindedness in *Vakyapadiya* (2.484): The intellect acquires critical acumen by familiarity with different traditions. How much does one really understand by merely following one's own reasoning

only? (प्रज्ञाविवेकं लभते भिन्नैरागमदर्शनैः । कियद्वा शक्यमुन्नेतुं स्वतर्कमनुधावता ॥ ४८४ ॥ *prajñāvivekaṃ labhate bhinnairāgamadarśanaiḥ | kiyadvā śakyamunnetuṃ svatarkamanudhāvatā || 484 ||*[6] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o once said, "Literature is like a conversation. If you listen only to yourself, you go mad." A literature that listens only inward becomes solipsistic. A literature that listens across difference becomes transformative.

A brief note on Danielle Hanson

The widely published poet, **Danielle Hanson (DH)**, received her MFA from Arizona State University. She is Writer-in-Residence and teaches poetry at University of California, Irvine. Danielle is the editor of The *Direct Path: A Collection of Reviews of Susheel Kumar Sharma's Unwinding Self (*forthcoming in late 2025. Earlier she had edited *Sightlines: View Points on Susheel Kumar Sharma's The Door is Half Open*.

Susheel Kumar Sharma (SKS) teaches English at University of Allahabad, Prayagraj. He is the author of *Unwinding Self*.)

Notes

1. *Guru-shishya parampara* (lit. teacher-taught lineage/ tradition) refers to the traditional teacher-student relationship in Indian culture, emphasizing the verbal transmission of knowledge and wisdom from mentor to disciple. The succession of teachers and disciples emphasizes the transmission of knowledge and wisdom from one generation of teachers to their disciples, creating a lineage of spiritual and practical learning. Knowledge, including advanced or subtle teachings, is primarily passed down orally and through personal interaction, not just books. The tradition ensures the preservation and continuation of ancient spiritual practices and philosophical insights. (further details: Ashok Ranade's "The guru-shishya parampara: a broader view," https://archive.org/details/dli.ministry.13710/mode/2up and https://www.wisdomlib.org/concept/guru-shishya-parampara#google_vignette

2. "I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." John Keats' letter to George and Thomas Keats (Hampstead, December 22, 1817), http://keats-poems.com/to-george-and-thomas-keats-hampstead-december-22-1817/

3. The term "Indian Poetic Theory" is being used to indicate a field.

4. In Sanskrit it is not always possible to give an exact citation. It was basically an oral tradition and many sayings are just passed on. The quotation marks have been used to indicate the translation of the quoted text in Sanskrit.

5. For more detail about the reviews of Sharma's poetry, see Hanson, *The Direct Path* (in Press).

6. www.wisdomlib.org/hinduism/book/vakyapadiya-of-bhartrihari/d/doc1336863.html)

Works Cited

Abrams, M. H. (1912). *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition.* https://archive.org/details/mirrorlampromant00abrarich.

Baldick, Chris. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford UP, 2001.

Bennet, Andrew and Royale, Nicholas. *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. Prentice Hall, 1999.

Bharata Muni. *Natyasastra*. Vol. 2, translated by Manomohan Ghosh, Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1951.

Bühler, G. *Detailed Report of a Tour in Search of Sanskrit Mss. made in Kasmir, Rajputana, and Central India.* 1877. https://archive.org/details/buehler-detailed-report-sanskrit-mss/page/2/mode/2up?q=maternal.

Cesaire, Aime. *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 1946-82* (CARAF Books: Caribbean and African Literature translated from the French). Tr. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, The University Press of Virginia, 1990.

Chakrabarti, Arindam. *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*. Bloomsbury, 2016.

Chaudhari, Satya Deva. *Glimpses of Indian Poetics*. Sahitya Akademi, 2002.

Colvin, Sidney. (Ed.). *Letters of John Keats to his Family and Friends*. London: Macmillan, 1891. https://archive.org/details/lettersofjohnkea00keatiala/page/n5/mode/2up.

Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2000.

Dalai, B. K., and Muḷe Ravīndra Ambādāsa. *Introduction to Indian Poetics and Aesthetics*. Centre of Advanced Study in Sanskrit, University of Pune, 2014.

Dasgotra, Tania. "Achrya Mammat evam Shri Harsh ke beech matuleeya sambandh ka prasfutan evam nirsan: ek vishleshan" (Hindi). IJSR 2022; 8(6): 155-157. www.anantaajournal.com.

Devy, G. N. ed., *Indian Literary Criticism: Theory and Interpretation*. Orient Longman, 2002.

Eliot, TS. "Eliot's Notes on The Waste Land". https://wasteland.windingway.org/endnotes.

---. "The Hollow Men". https://poets.org/poem/hollow-men.

Enright, D. J. and Ernest De Chickera. *English Critical Texts*. Oxford UP, 1997.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomsbury, 2000.

Gupta, Neerja A. *A Student's Handbook of Indian Aesthetics*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.

Habib, M. A. R. *Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present: An Introduction*. Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Hanson, Danielle (Ed.). *Sightlines: View Points on Susheel Kumar Sharma's The Door is Half Open*. Paragon International Publishers, 2024.

---. *The Direct Path: A Collection of Reviews of Susheel Kumar Sharma's Unwinding Self.* In press.

Hughes, Langston. "Theme for English B". https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47880/theme-for-english-b.

Irving, Henry (Ed.). *The Complete works of William Shakespeare.* P.F. Collier, https://archive.org/details/completeworksofw00shakrich/page/n15/mode/2up.

Kapoor, Kapil. *Literary Theory: Indian Conceptual Framework*. Affiliated East-West Press Pvt. Ltd., 1998.

Keats, John. John Keats' letter to George and Thomas Keats (Hampstead, December 22, 1817), http://keats-poems.com/to-george-and-thomas-keats-hampstead-december-22-1817/

Kumar, Sanjeev (Ed.). *Bricks and Bouquets*: Views and Reviews on Susheel Kumar Sharma's *From the Core Within*. Creative Books, 2008.

Kushwaha, M S & Sanjay Kumar Misra. *An Introduction to the Study of Indian Poetics*. D.K. Printworld, 2020.

Leitch, Vincent B (Ed.) *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, W. W. Norton & Co., 2001.

Lodge, David (*Edited), Revised and expanded by* Nigel Wood, *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader,* Pearson Education, 2000.

Lynn, Steven. *Texts And Contexts: Writing about Literature with Critical Theory.* https://archive.org/details/textscontextswri00lynn.

Marx, Karl. "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm

---. "Eleven Theses on Feuerbach", https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/

Roberts, Michèle. "The Fallen Woman: Prostitution in Literature," (*The Guardian*, Fri 14 Apr 2017). www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/14/the-fallen-woman-prostitution-in-literature.

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty.* https://archive.org/details/onliberty00inmill/mode/2up?q=side.

Milton, John. *Samson Agonistes.* https://milton.host.dartmouth.edu/reading_room/samson/drama/text.shtml

Müller, Max. *Introduction to the Science of Religions.* https://archive.org/details/introductiontoth014888mbp/page/n1/mode/2up.

Newton, K. M. (Edited and Introduced), *A Reader in Modern Literary Criticism*, The Macmillan Press, 1992.

Okri, Ben. "Writers in a World at War: Ben Okri for Pen International Congress 2024". https://www.pen-international.org/ben-okri.

Patra, Pradip Kumar (Ed.). *Voices at the Door: Critical Responses to Susheel Kumar Sharma's The Door is Half Open*. Upanayan Publications, 2023.

Paz, Octavio. *The Other Voice.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991

Pollock, Sheldon. *A Rasa Reader*. Permanent Black, 2020.

Raghavan, Venkatarama, and Nagendra. *An Introduction to Indian Poetics*. Macmillan and Company Limited, 1970.

Rushdie, Salman. *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing.* https://archive.org/details/vintagebookofind00salm.

Sharma, Susheel Kumar. *From the Core Within.* Creative, 1999.

---. *The Door is Half Open.* Adhyayan, 2012.

---. *Unwinding Self.* Vishvanatha Kaviraja Institute, 2020.

Shaw, Bernard, *Prefaces by Bernard Shaw*. 1934, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.62319/page/n7/mode/2up?q=conflict

Smith, James Harry and Edo Winfield Parks (Compiled and Edited by) *Great Critics Anthology: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*. W W Norton & Company, 1951.

Srivastava, Krishna Gopal. *An Encyclopaedia of Critical Terms: Eastern & Western Traditions*, Volume 1-4. Radha Publications, 2013.

Waugh, Patricia. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. Oxford UP, 2006. https://archive.org/details/literarytheorycr0000unse/page/n5/mode/2up.

https://ashtadhyayi.com/paribhashendushekhar/133?highlight=%E0%A4%AE%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%A4%E0%A5%8D%E0%A4%B0%E0%A4%BE

https://allduniv.academia.edu/SusheelSharma/Reviews%20on%20Unwinding%20Self.