

C L Khatri's *For You to Decide: Reflections on Physics and Metaphysics of Life*

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Abstract. Philosophical, spiritual and mystical aspects of life are Khatri's major concerns in his poetry. With his philosophical musings and insight, he does his best to awaken a lost soul from the deep slumber so that he can continue the existential journey of life with head held in high esteem, with untiring endurance, while evolving a futuristic vision of the world beyond. The paper is an attempt to explore reflections of physics and metaphysics of life in C L Khatri's latest poetry collection *For You to Decide*. It also examines other aspects of this book including his use of poetic devices and the beauty of proverbial expressions.

Keywords : Physics; metaphysics; irony; vedantic.

Dr. C.L.Khatri's *For You to Decide* is his fifth collection of poems. His other collections include *Kargil*, *Ripples in the Lake*, *Two- Minute Silence* and *Goolar Ka Phool* (Hindi Poetry). All the poems of this latest anthology deal with a variety of themes such as life and death, love and love of nature, hope and dreams, God and religiosity, philosophy, spirituality, and mysticism, ecological concerns, sensuousness and beauty, plight of woman, contemporary issues-national and international, impact of science and technology etc. By virtue of his outstanding contribution he, as a bilingual poet (English and Hindi), has emerged as a significant voice in Indian English poetry. He has power to motivate the dejected. He can, through his poetry, touch the chords of heart. His mission and vision is abstract and cerebral and it requires a sharpened perception and profound erudition to realise the latent essence of his poetic thought, creed and creativity. The book embodies Khatri's scintillating reflections on physical and metaphysical aspects of life.

Dr Ram Bhagwan Singh in his review of the book rightly comments, "A mere preliminary reading is proof enough for his cerebral outlook on subjects immediate and cosmopolitan." (Singh 2017:93) But Khatri moves from the immediate to the universal and the spiritual. He believes in the divine power of soul. Vedantic thought is vibrant and apparent in his poetry. In the very first poem "Mask", visionary and profound in intent, he starts emphasising to unmask, to perceive our true self to see the celestial path of ultimate reality. He decides to keep

Off with masks today
I am bliss, peace and truth-
a refugee without refuge. (Khatri : 2016:13. 10-12)

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He holds that putting mask is 'deceitful'. 'Everything looks transparent' in the divine land. Indeed, it is a symbolic poem. Body is the mask of soul. Death is inevitable. Mask of materialism needs to be discarded for the appearance of and new birth of soul. He further says that life is 'wardrobe of deceits'. The poem has philosophical implications. After 'funeral pyre' and 'reverential rites' are over, soul emerges fresh and elated.

"Flames Within", another suggestive poem, strengthens his firm belief in immortality and divinity of soul. With a brilliant metaphor of 'candle' and 'flames' he lends philosophical dimension to existence and life. Creation-continuum is well sustained :

I am a candle who has lived its life.
Once a frail candle lit me.
I lit a few candles
and they lit some others. (15.1-4)

His poetry speaks volume of the ultimate reality and transience of mundane life. Immortality of soul and mortality of body are metaphorically highlighted. He realises the presence of divine spark in man. His philosophy and vision is outstanding. It shows the profundity of the poet's realisation :

I will exist in the flames forever.
Storms can blow out the flames
but not the flames within a candle. (9-11)

Even in the 'graveyard' he recites 'pristine poetry' with '*mystic music of / birds, beasts and conical trees*'. Mysteries of the world also get reflected in "Cavernous Mouth":

Mountains, caves and fire are all dots
Making and unmaking triangles
I don't know what lies within...
(67.16-18)

God and Religiosity are other themes of his poetry. While bringing home his point the poet introduces a new technique and conceptualises 'technocarnation' of God in the cyber age. Since he is a man of this science and technology age, he interprets aspects of Divinity and adds his own concept to that of God's incarnation, in technical terms in his "Eleventh Incarnation". He believes, '*nothing is abstraction/ even god is god particle*'. He reiterates age-long conviction :

With his manifestations
strewn over the sky, earth

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water, seabed and beyond

He is omnipresent, omnipotent .(32.1-4)

Khatri is a sensitive poet endowed with insightful power to look at life and death from both sides. The titular poem "For You to Decide" is his deep contemplation over life and death, body and soul, space and time, history and geography, survival and sustenance, world and beyond, genocide and philanthropy. With his modern outlook he perceives the future and says days are not far when '*Bharat's nine rasas*' would be prepared and 'babies would be sold in shops' in view of growing scientific explorations. However, he wants the people to '*measure/ the infinite space and time*'. He leaves it to the coming generation to deal with it:

This is for you to decide
For me it's time to retire. (20.25-26)

In his poems, metaphysical musings and philosophical churning of ideas are also galore. In another poem "Frail Frame", the poet speaks about time and human existence:

Graduated in the sands of time, a marginal
peasant preaching precious page of life,
an entrepreneur of sun and shadow,
winter's night and summer's rain –
silent crusade for the cursed denizen. (72.15-19)

Inevitability of death is touchingly described in his next poem "Sometimes I Dream". Philosophical proclamation of '*Brahma Satyam Jagat mithya*' is expressed in tune with this cardinal philosophic reality :

Only I am at risk
a suspended particle in the air
bones jingling
'jingle bell, jingle bell, Jingle all the way'
till I see the doomsday. (22. 22-26)

His poetry is marked by religious, spiritual and mystical questions and observation of rites and rituals and other religious mores, faith and conventional religiosity. He touches upon many religious themes. His religious poems include "Navaratri", "Waiting for a Vishnu", "E God", "Religion", "Eleventh Incarnation", "I have God" etc. The poet seems to have a keen insight into religious matters. He prays for 'pelf, power and peace'. He believes 'meditation' and 'prayer' purge the people and their soul of 'dross' and all the gross desires, making us feel '*lighter and brighter than a golden leaf in autumn*'. In "Navaratri" he reveals:

I kept howling like a jackal in a lion's claws.
 My body parts writhing in the prayer room
 as if popcorns are frying in an oven (51. 16-18)

At some places, they are also laced with severe sarcasm. He not only brings to the fore religious significance, but mocks at so-called practices. “Paedophilia” mocks at acts of so-called god men and women who befool the people in the name of religion and God. He depicts a realistic picture in the following lines of the poem:

A sanyasin watching
 adult film at the dead of night.
 I wonder
 if Adam's temptation was paedophilia.
 (58.15-18)

His poetry takes us ‘along on a slow rhythmic swim’ rejuvenating our soul, with ‘holy chanting, bells and floating Dias’, ‘sweet fragrance of flowers, sandal and camphor’, thus presenting the beautiful scene of Indian landscape as it is. His religiosity finds a rich articulation inculcating in us socio-religious values. In his poetry, we find a new kind of religion-perspective. He defines “Religion” as ‘sweat of peasants’ and ‘blood of soldiers’, ‘empathy with suffering’ and ‘sacrifice of possessions’. Bespeaking of essence of Indian philosophy, he says:

Religion –
 a trekking in an unknown terrain
 a sea voyage to discover the voyage. (41.25-27)

His poems deal at length with life and death and seek spiritual salvation. “Chessboard” is one such poem about transience of life. He knows:

At dusk wisdom dawns
 King or Queen—all are pawns
 in the masters' epiphany.
 Work or wait for a new dawn. (54.21-24)

In his poetry, Khatri also talks about love and love of nature. His perspective on nature embodies his belief in healing and elevating power of nature. His description of nature and its beauty is outstanding. He presents vivid pictures of nature. “Soothing Balm” is one of the finest short poems of CL Khatri. He soothes us:

Moon in the night
 I suspended all light
 to see through the darkness of the sky
 between the dark of me and the moonlight.

I hold on the cool soothing balm to my eyes
to soothe the fevered mind
and save the skin from scorching heat. (68. 1-7)

His love of Nature is quite remarkable in some of his poems. Nature provides him good stuff to chisel his thought. He understands dual aspect of nature – constructive and destructive. He accepts it in “Ripe Fruits”:

Wind, sun and rain–both friend and foe –
he had to withstand with cheerful equanimity.
The trunk keeps the records of each year.
It holds a mirror, too, for the visitors.
But who cares for the butchered buds, laid out leaves?
All they care is fruit, its fragrance and juice. (73.9-14)

His poetry is replete with several snapshots of sensuousness and charming beauty of the body. He takes pleasure in the erotic aspect of love. In “The Bliss of Beauty” he titillates us :

I am enthralled by the aroma
emanating from her flowering body
like an arrow from the quiver of Kamdev
like a freshly ripe Alphonso ready to be squeezed. (69.1-4)

He is yearning to ‘have license like bee to kiss all her petals/ to suck her juice, to inhale her fragrance.’ Using *carpe diem* theory he also woos in the same poem:

enjoy the bliss of beauty-a golden phase in life
apply the beauty balm to the aching mate
before you are yoked in a plough to pull for the rest. (15-17)

Further, his poetry also reflects his ecological concerns and his emphasis on the process of afforestation for proper cosmic balance. Today the heaven of nature lies ‘plundered a million times from north America to Siberia from Arctic to Antarctica.’ Through an allegorical anecdote in the poem “Love”, he rebukes man for his soaring greed of materialism and advocates for the afforestation to maintain the ecological balance :

Now there is no stump, no new tree;
but the peasant turns to it every day. (25. 33-34)

He is a keen observer and endowed with a sensibility to feel, sympathise and empathise with the masses, classes apart. He is much agile and alive to the

surroundings he lives in. He depicts very realistic pictures of society and the people. He appreciates the best things and satirises the worst. He is true to his poetic duty. "Deluge of Development" is an insightful poem that talks about a very alarming condition of the contemporary world. With scientific and technological advancement today, 'no one wants to be gardener' but happy with his 'lotus in the plastic pot'; this reflects superficiality and artificiality of the so called modern outlook. People have lost their true taste for the natural inherent beauty of everything. The poet is sad to see, '*The earth is levelled; no hills, no hillocks*'. (26. 7-8) Bewitching growth' of materialistic greed has blinded them. '*glitz and gloss of neon lamps in the day/ smog shields the sun and the moon*'. (14-15) He prays to God to :

...save the country
from deluge of development
epidemic of synthetic microbes.(17-20)

In his poetry, Khatri also raises some burning issues – national and international- of contemporary times and airs out his methodology to resolve them. Today everywhere prevail mounds of problems. Suicide is one of them. In "Statistics of Suicide", the poet probes into this kind of attitude and finds its reply in the answer posed by himself :

Is it the crumbling blocks of faith,
Faith that hangs on primordial signs
or proliferation of degrees in the dock? (27.10-12)

Witty and epigrammatic expressions are his extra qualities jewelled to his poetic writings pregnant with didactic spirit and maximum maxim. "Muse" is a testament to this. He speaks about poetic muse, his creativity, and critics' approach to demystifying the 'mystical maze'. Expressions such as '*The best speaks the least*', '*In fools' world who cares for verse?*' etc are brilliant. He is a critic to the critical approaches which take nowhere if they don't properly guide to the reality :

Critics' call to make out the maize
decoding-coding-re-coding
denied access to creator's code. (33.7-9)

Khatri is a humanitarian to the core. He expresses his sympathy with the poor who are downtrodden and economically deprived, often victimised by the prevailing political systems. The poor are '*driven like a flock of sheep*' by *khaki-clad jackals with batons*'. They are '*grieved crow*'. They are wounded every now and then, and then '*balm (of sweet words) would be rubbed/ on the green wounds of the injured*'. Disappointed at the deplorable condition of the poor in the contemporary times, he expresses in "Justify the Death", his deep anguish :

Human life in India is pretty cheap.
Everything else has a price. (38.11-12)

‘Hospital’ bespeaks of deplorable condition of hospitals and the wretched patients locked in them. There is ‘*A surge of crying crowd in the corridor/of Sadar hospital waiting for their gods/with endless patience of centuries/conditioned to the stinking pool of urine.*’(65.5-8) He observes patients and their relatives ‘*huddled together in the corridor/Like cattle in a worn out truck taken to a slaughter house.*’(11-12) ‘*Perfumed phantoms greet your purse with cupid smile*’. (24) He satirically remarks :

Here time moves at snail pace,
snail breeds paradise for private purse.
Last night I walked in with writhing pain.
They welcomed me like a wedding guest. (17-20)

Plight of woman in India is also deplorable. His poetry is a strong voice against atrocities not only on the poor but also on woman and advocates for her protection. She is subjected to series of cruelties. Woman and the poor are marginalised. “Writing a New Ramayan” is a strong feminist poem presenting the role reversal, “*She is writing a new Ramayana/ where Sita rules over Ayodhya in his absence/ Ram has to pass through fire ordeal*”... (31.12-14) Today’s women have moved away from Shiv K Kumar’s suppressed women as portrayed in his poem “Indian Women” “*waiting for their men’s return/ till even the shadows/roll up their contours*”. (Kumar. 2010.20)

“Winter Tree” is a significant poem suffused with social and familial ethos. Values and ideals are prioritised in social life. For articulating this ideal message, he resorts to the use of allusion, metaphors and parallelism. He poignantly gives a harrowing account of the plight of the old people, ‘forsaken’, denuded like a winter tree:

Over the years blood turns cold
under the weight of shared winters
flowers turn into ferns
saplings clench their teeth against the tree
and in a wayward jungle flee. (39.7-11)

The abandoned parents have ‘*swollen eyes and empty ears*’. The poet is astonished and baffled and gets thoughtful. Putting the question to the sensible people, ‘*When do wisdom teeth listen to the toothless wisdom?*’ (39.15), he further throws some light on their sad conditions :

He stands as helpless as Bhismpitamah
watching biological bonds shaken off
with a warm handshake,

twins turning into aliens
fighting like a friend... (39.16-20)

As a true patriotic and chauvinistic poet, Dr. Khatri takes pride in anything of his country. He is bold enough to throw his gauntlet to the borrowed ideas and ideals of the modern times. He does not want the people to remain in the shadow of colonialism. He discovers the myth of the slavery and in “Postcolonialism”, he declares :

I am not the dark reflection
of any ivory tower,
insinuating web of a centric world
sculpted, narrated by a foreign bard.(43. 4-7)

With a lot of pride in his own cultural ethos he proclaims:

The skin I am born with is mine
With sun, moon and rain it shines. (16-17)

As a matter of fact, his poetry is a documentation of contemporary issues with solution well suggested. His preying eyes scan the debauching act of the nefarious hands of the times. ‘Nirbhaya’s cry’ pains him to such an extent that he stands up with the weapon of poetry. He believes that it is only poetry that can sublimate the uncontrolled impulses of the people. Poetry is a ‘candle’, and a ‘prayer’. He remarks in “Poetry Wants to Stand with You” :

When demons of barbarism
venoms of Jihadis, infidels
suck the very sap of life
Poetry wields gun. (46.13-16)

That’s why he appeals to the people to:

listen to the song of your soul
dance like a peacock in the forest of life.
Poetry wants to stand with you. (26-28)

However, he doesn’t believe in blaming others for the ‘cracks in the walls’ of our mutual understanding and cordial relations. He rightly avers that ‘Blaming others is an easy escape route’. He appeals to the people to give due respect to women because ‘God resides where women are worshipped’. Hope and dreams are also his major preoccupations. His optimistic stand is quite remarkable in the poem “Turban Man”. He epigrammatically says:

Truly he lives in hope and dies without hope.
But hope doesn't die; it transmigrates. (66.10-11)

‘Your Dreams Live Afresh’ is another poem of hope. He further infuses hope in us:

I saw in the lake of your eyes
floating earthen lamps of big dreams
flickering in purple faith
whispering with silent grey water
making and breaking on the waves...(71.2-6)

In addition to the poems analysed above, his three liners and Haiku are equally important. They are intensely touching and great eye openers as they are in tune with our moods and feelings. Brevity of expressions, maxims, proverbial statements, oft-quotable lines with epigrammatic flavour, and, of course, sharp satire on follies and foibles of modern times etc characterise his poetry to a great extent. ‘Freedom has its own pitfalls’, ‘When do wisdom teeth listen to the toothless wisdom?’, ‘Separation is a sweetener’, ‘Difference makes all the difference’, ‘desolate heart brews its own Brandie /to feed the ecstasy of meaning’, ‘Hate feeds hate’, ‘bullet breeds the crop of bullets’, ‘A slave learns the art of master’, ‘When word fails barrel speaks’, ‘Native home has a compelling seduction’ etc are brilliant expressions.

In this way we see that C.L.Khatri as a poet of contemporary social reality opens the flood gates of ideas, thoughts and eclectic feeling and emotions on the thematic canvass of his poetic creativity and thought. With the beauty of his poetry and creative art and style he casts a spell on heart and mind of his readers to decide the best of the options available so as to enable them to enjoy life and taste bitter-sweet candy of contemporary times, experience the best and realise the spark of divinity in them. D C Chambial’s remark about this book is worth quoting here:

Khatri’s poems are like the sparks of fire that
instantly enkindle the imagination of the readers...
(Chambial 2017: 189)

His poetry is a motivational and inspirational guideline for the people who are curious to explore the realities of life and realise true essence of the mundane existence. His images and metaphors are striking and evocative with simple lucid and clear language and diction. His vision is well articulated and his suggestiveness is worth implementing in life:

Bees suck nectar from flowers
Honey and undefiled flowers
A lesson for you. (75)

For You to Decide is really an exquisite book of poetry by Dr. C.L.Khatri. It is a treasure trove of excellent poems enough to stir myriad emotions of the readers. So, let us go through it and decide to follow the path of values and ideals, evolve and imbibe substantially constructive and positive ideas and thought, revive our own culture – social and individual, and understand humanity in all perspectives, rekindle sparks to our soul and perceive the essence and beauty of life. As a physical and metaphysical poet, he makes intensive efforts to wake up dozing and sleeping readers from their deep slumber as his poetry is ‘to spark the flame’. For understanding this profound lore and learning, *For You to Decide* is an outstanding companion for the readers who, after relishing the ecstasy of his words, are supposed:

to sprout, to bloom, to sing
 in the frozen ground
 as a paean to pangs
 of deportation
 desperation
 craving
 a lurking hope
 of final union
 like a river
 meeting
 another river
 and flowing on and on...(Pangs of Parting 57 : 49-60)

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