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A LOOK INTO THE HALF-OPEN DOOR: A CRITICAL JOURNEY THROUGH *SIGHTLINES* ESSAYS ON SUSHEEL KUMAR SHARMA [1]

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Susheel Kumar Sharma's poetic anthology, *Sightlines: View Points on The Door is Half Open*, curated by Danielle Hanson[2], strikes a resonant balance between critical inquiry and artistic reflection. This 2024 publication transforms Sharma's work into a multi-faceted exploration, where Indian spirituality, cultural heritage, and contemporary critique converge into a meaningful dialogue. It shows how Sharma's poetry, far from being merely decorative, enquires into the essence of India's sacred symbols and ethical dilemmas, while questioning

[1] Dr. Susheel Kumar Sharma is a poet, critic, and professor of English at the University of Allahabad, where he has been teaching since 2003. He has authored four books and published extensively, including thirty-five research papers, five interviews, and twenty-eight book reviews. His poetry collections, *From the Core Within* (1999) and *The Door is Half Open* (2012), have received critical acclaim, with selections from his work translated into multiple languages, including Assamese, French, Hindi, Lithuanian, Serbian, and Turkish. Beyond academia, Dr. Sharma is known for his keen observation of social and literary issues and his enthusiasm for engaging with students eager to learn. Balancing poetry and criticism, he moves through the challenges of academic life with a nonchalant yet thoughtful approach, continuously refining his skills in reading, teaching, and scholarly discourse.

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the excesses of modernity. His verses, infused with the symbolism of figures like Shiva and Ganga, transcend mere tribute. Instead, they offer an introspective lens into humanity's vulnerabilities against the grandeur of time and divinity. For example, in Arbind Kumar Choudhary's essay, "Poetic Flavour of Susheel Kumar Sharma," the Ganges is not just a river but becomes a philosophical axis, where mythology intersects with spiritual inquiry. Choudhary convincingly argues that Sharma's work reflects a crucial articulation of India's cultural and spiritual consciousness.

The anthology's structure itself is part of its unique strength. Section A comprises critical essays that examine Sharma's poetry through a variety of perspectives, unravelling its profound interplay of personal and universal themes. Section B, on the other hand, allows Sharma's own voice to emerge through interviews, where he reflects on his creative process, his inspirations, and his perspectives on the evolving literary landscape. This combination of analysis and personal narrative brings a remarkable depth to the anthology, blending the analytical with the human. What distinguishes *Sightlines* is its broader implications for Indian English poetry. Sharma stands not merely as an individual voice but as one who articulates the struggles and hopes of a collective consciousness. His poetry, touching on themes of identity, justice, and ecological balance, resonates far beyond personal experience. As such, this anthology does not simply critique Sharma's work but elevates it to a manifesto for the times—urgent, deeply poignant, and undeniably modern.

The essays in *Sightlines: View Points on Susheel Kumar Sharma's The Door is Half Open* look into his relationship with tradition, modernity and the natural world. Each essay appears to offer its own lens, forming a mosaic that reveals Sharma's distinctive voice—a voice rooted deeply in India's cultural rhythms while facing head-on the crises of identity, justice, and the environment that mark contemporary times. In "Ganga Mata – A Prayer," Susheel Kumar Sharma addresses the Ganges not just as a river but as a spiritual entity, a force intertwined with India's moral and sacred history. This is no mere geographical tribute. Sharma elevates the Ganges to the status of divine witness - a keeper of purity, forgiveness, and salvation. Its mythological role as the cleanser of sins and redeemer of souls becomes central to his portrayal. Through this invocation, he taps into centuries of cultural memory, binding his verse to the enduring values of Hindu philosophy.

Choudhary sees this use of symbolism as an act of cultural reclamation. Sharma, he argues, challenges the dominance of materialism in modernity, reminding readers of spiritual

Indi@logs, Vol 12 (1) 2025, pp 221-232 ISSN 2339-8523

truths that have been increasingly overshadowed. By anchoring his poetry in sacred symbols, Sharma quietly protests against the hollowness of consumerist pursuits. Critics add that Sharma's genius lies in his ability to merge the personal with the universal. The Ganges, in his work, transcends its physical form, becoming a metaphor for life's continuity - the ceaseless cycles of birth and death, and the hope for redemption. But the sacredness of the Ganges is undercut by its environmental degradation. Kalikinkar Pattanayak, in his essay "Reflecting on *The Door is Half Open*" and "For Reasons Unknown," examines how Sharma uses the Ganges as both a spiritual and ecological lament. A river once revered for its purity now stands polluted, its desecration a stark reflection of human greed. Industrial waste and exploitation choke the very life it symbolises, turning it into a mirror of the broader ecological crisis gripping contemporary India. Through poems like "Ganga Mata" and "Liberation at Varanasi," Sharma crafts a vivid commentary on this desecration. The river, once a beacon of purity, now bears the weight of humanity's failures. Pattanayak argues that Sharma's ecological concerns resonate globally, connecting his work to movements advocating sustainability and respect for nature. Om Dwivedi and Navya Aravind Karalingannavar further explore this in "Ecological Consciousness in *The Door is Half Open*," noting how Sharma's environmentalism is deeply rooted in Indian philosophical ideas, particularly *prakriti* (nature) as sacred and inviolable. His poetry, therefore, takes on the tone of an ecological manifesto, urging a harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature.

Social justice, too, looms large in Sharma's verse. N.S.R. Ayengar, in "Poetry of Protest: Susheel Sharma's *The Door is Half Open*," highlights his critique of inequity and exploitation. Sharma's poetry does not flinch in condemning the dowry system, the marginalization of women, and the indifference of government institutions towards the poor. His work strips back the façade of tradition to expose systems that perpetuate suffering, offering instead a vision of reform and equality. His essay presents how Sharma's poetry stands as a rich tapestry of ecological and social critique, woven together with spiritual threads. It demonstrates the enduring power of verse to interrogate and inspire, to dismantle and reclaim. His work reminds us that redemption - of the earth and of humanity - is still possible, but it demands reflection, responsibility, and a return to sacred truths.

Sharma's protest poetry channels an unyielding empathy, giving voice to those silenced by oppression and societal neglect. In works such as "For a Bride Who Thinks of Suicide and Poverty: Some Scenes," he explores the fractures of society, laying bare the grim realities

endured by women, the poor, and the marginalized. "For a Bride Who Thinks of Suicide," in particular, confronts the dowry system with a stark and unflinching lens, reflecting the cultural inertia that claims the lives of countless young women. Ayengar suggests this poetic lament extends beyond personal sorrow, transforming into a broader critique of the systemic failures that enable such tragedies to persist. It is as if Sharma's grief seeps into the foundations of his activism. Ayengar further situates Sharma within the lineage of reformist poets like Kabir and Sarojini Naidu, individuals who wielded their craft as both illumination and revolution. Sharma's work, deeply rooted in Indian idioms, carries a resonance that reaches beyond its immediate cultural context. Through his verse, he grapples with universal concerns - gender inequity, economic disparity, and the exploitation of the vulnerable. This duality - grounded yet expansive - is a hallmark of his poetry. Rabindra Kumar Verma, in his essay "Spiritual, Socio-Cultural and Political Consciousness in *The Door is Half Open*," underscores how Sharma's poetry fuses ethical duty with spiritual reflection. Verma sees Sharma's engagement with *dharma* and *karma* as an assertion that true spirituality cannot be separated from justice or ecological stewardship. Through this lens, Sharma's poetry transforms into a call for personal and collective accountability.

The tension between tradition and modernity also plays a significant role in Sharma's body of work. Gurrapu Damodar examines this in his essay, "Journey from Tradition to Modernity," observing how Sharma navigates the contradictions inherent in these forces. For instance, in "Ganga Mata – A Prayer," the Ganges emerges as both a symbol of spiritual purity and a stark reflection of environmental decay. The poem mourns the river's desecration, which mirrors the moral degradation of the modern world. Damodar suggests that the river represents the condition of the country: "if the river is in chains the country too is in chains of poverty, social evils, pollution, violence and exploitation at various levels" (21). His work embodies the role of the poet in contemporary India: simultaneously a custodian and a reformer. Sharma regrets people's loss of empathy for fellow beings as well as the environment. In Damodar's opinion the interplay between reverence and critique forms the crux of Sharma's poetry, allowing him to balance a respect for cultural heritage with a critique of its neglect. Sharma's ability to straddle the living with the non-living worlds makes him a preserver of tradition and a commentator on its modern disintegration at the same time. It is perhaps this duality that defines Sharma's poetic voice - an amalgam of reverence and rebellion. At a deeper level, the poet reflects his desire which can be achieved by paying respect to the non-living things around.

Indi@logs, Vol 12 (1) 2025, pp 221-232 ISSN 2339-8523

Through his poetic vision, Sharma advocates for the preservation of spiritual and cultural heritage while boldly addressing the challenges modernity presents. It is a delicate, unsteady balance, but one that Sharma navigates with remarkable skill. What Damodar witnesses in Sharma's words is his urgent attention to societal flaws while probing the fractured psyche of modernity itself. In doing so, Sharma crafts a body of work that makes you internalize his palpable emergency. His verse speaks of the complexities of the past and the urgencies of the present. Damodar interprets the tension between tradition and modernity not as a nostalgic clinging to the past but as a reasoned call for balance. Sharma is at physical and emotional pain to see the condition of the holy river. While Sharma acknowledges the unstoppable tide of modernization, he also expects a utopia free from corruption, pollution and degeneration. Rampant corruption, ever increasing pollution and gradual deterioration of moral values disturb him. He warns against discarding the wisdom of the ancients in a headlong pursuit of progress. Sharma isn't just yearning for the freedom of the past; he wants a future where the values of reverence and balance that once guided India's spiritual and ecological harmony are revived - not stifled by the rush of unthinking progress. His use of mythological allusions and cultural symbols connects readers to a spiritual legacy, anchoring us within the pressing concerns of the present - such as the environmental crises and social fragmentation that seem to have overtaken our times, making him fervently hope for a healthy society that should be a marvel for all.

Rashmi Jain's essay, "*The Door is Half Open*: A Mythical Study," begins with a strong theoretical approach and explores the poet's understanding of myth and archetypes. Jain examines how Sharma employs myth both as a storytelling tool and as a symbolic structure. She highlights his invocation of figures like Bhagiratha - the legendary bringer of the Ganges to earth through unyielding penance - as a poignant reminder of humanity's responsibilities towards both nature and each other. In doing so, she argues, Sharma transforms myth into a shared language of memory and meaning, allowing ancient wisdom to engage with modern problems in a deeply resonant way. In this, myths are no longer static; instead, they form an active bridge between individual and collective memory, and between the past and the needs of the present. She rounds up the essay by remarking how literature is an extension of mythology and every human society has a mythology which is inherited, transmitted and diversified by literature. Jain remarks that Mythology and Literature inhabit and function within the same imaginative world which is governed by its own modes, conventions, symbols,

myths and genres. Thus the collection of poems by Susheel Kumar Sharma through the myths and archetypes reunites the ancient and modern India with an urge to move forward while preserving and protecting the heritage.

In "A Sojourn of Collective Consciousness," Binod Mishra and Ranganath Thakur write, "The collection begins with Ganga and ends at the *ghats* of Ganga, commingling the symbol of purity and forgiveness, a representation of Indian values". The two authors survey the threads of India's psyche interwoven through Sharma's work. Their focus on Sharma's use of natural and mythological imagery, interpreting his reverence for the Ganges not just as recurring symbol but as part of a larger spiritual puzzle lends their essay its distinctive quality. For them *The Door is Half Open* is a representation of the collective consciousness of the Indian masses. They liken the whole collection to a spiritual journey of a common man with Indian sensibility who wants to reclaim the past and the traditional legacy, a search for the meaning of life and consciousness. The essay does evoke the contemplative nature of Sharma's poetry but neglects to examine how his choices of rhythm, tone and diction animate his themes. This surface-level engagement, lacking analysis of his poetic craftsmanship, leaves the discussion incomplete.

Mary Mohanty in "Environment and Culture in the Anthropocene" situates Sharma as a modern eco-poet bearing the weight of India's natural and cultural heritage. She writes, "What is fascinating about Sharma's poetry is that it flows uninhibitedly with scant regard for the trappings of the technicalities of the craft and without any 'palpable, design' (Keats) and conscious artistry. This lends a radical charm to his poetry" (71). She articulates how Sharma's portrayal of the Ganges is striking, showing it as both sacred and desecrated, representing his critique of the materialism that pollutes more than rivers, perhaps even the soul. "The Ganges, sacred and suffering, is not just a river but the essence of Sharma's plea for ecological preservation," she writes (65). She notes how he copiously and fearlessly quotes Sanskrit verses, especially in the Ganga poem drawing freely from diverse classical sources like Valmiki's *Sri Gangastotram*, Sankaracharya's *Ganga Stuti,* Panditraj Jagannath's *Gangalahari,* Kalidas' *Gangastakstotra* and *Skanda Purana etc. "*No poet can ever shake off the ponderous influence of the past, (especially as it is in the present case) where a rich reservoir

Indi@logs, Vol 12 (1) 2025, pp 221-232 ISSN 2339-8523

of 'stotra literature'[3] make an inevitable impingement on the poet's creative consciousness" (71). But the essay could have gone further - linking Sharma's eco-poetics to global movements for environmental justice might have made her critique even more compelling.

Nikunja Kishore Das, in "Mapping the Ganges: A Comparative Study of the Poetry of Keki N. Daruwalla, Arvind K. Mehrotra, and Susheel K. Sharma," points out how Sharma blends ancient symbols with modern environmental consciousness, imagining an "ideal state" cleansed of corruption and degeneration (128). He quotes Suresh Dubey to say how "Susheel is not writing for Sanskrit scholars but his aim is to decolonise the Indian English poets, readers, students and teachers" (Dubey 82), and talks about attempts at the "chutnification"[4] of language. While he sets Sharma alongside other poets writing on nature effectively, Das's essay gets tangled in thematic comparisons, giving less attention to the specifics of Sharma's use of metaphor or imagery which are vital to understanding his work's depth.

Pragya Mishra's "The Intersection of Tradition and Modernity in Susheel Kumar Sharma's Poetry" calls Sharma "a poet whose modern reflections are grounded in ancient values" (35). She examines Sharma's ability to balance ancient values like *karma* and *dharma* with critiques of modern consumerism and disconnection. This essay illuminates Sharma's philosophical essence, yet it does not fully explore his poetic technique - how his structuring of verses or use of symbolism deepens this balance. Including that might have lent it another layer of richness. Natasha Miladinović's "Nature as an Extension of the Self" approaches Sharma's work with introspection, arguing that for him, nature is not backdrop but a mirror of the self. She writes, "For Sharma, nature is not just there; it's who we are, pure yet marked by life's struggles" (75). While her contemplative tone resonates, her analysis feels somewhat

[3] Stotra literature encompasses devotional hymns and songs of praise in Indian religious tradition, derived from the Sanskrit word "Stotra" (स्तोत्र). These musical compositions, rooted in the Vedas and Puranas, honor deities and spiritual concepts through various forms, including Nama-stotra (focusing on divine names) and Sahasranama (thousand-name hymns). Notable examples like the Shiva Tandava Stotram and Vishnu Sahasranama are chanted to deepen spiritual connection, strengthen devotion, and seek divine blessings, distinguishing them from recited sacred texts called shastras.

[4] The term "chutnification," coined by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* (1981), describes how English absorbs Indian linguistic and cultural elements, much like chutney blends diverse ingredients into something new. By combining "chutney" with "-fication," Rushdie captured the way English incorporates Hindi, Urdu, and regional Indian expressions, reflecting India's hybrid cultural identity. The concept has influenced contemporary writers to embrace linguistic mixing and has entered academic discussions about language fusion, alongside terms like pidgin and creole.

narrow. Expanding the essay to include comparisons to other eco-poets exploring similar themes might have broadened its scope and added weight to her insights.

Ranjita Barik, in "Reforming Society through Verse: Susheel Kumar Sharma's Social Vision," and Savitri Tripathi, in "Susheel Kumar Sharma: A Poet of Philosophical and Social Concerns," both examine Sharma's engagement with social justice, though from different angles. Barik focuses on his poems addressing gender inequality and poverty, emphasizing his empathy for the marginalized and likening him to Indian reformist poets. She argues that Sharma pushes readers "to confront uncomfortable realities and imagine a better society" (195). Tripathi, on the other hand probes into the dual nature of his work, highlighting his commitment to both spirituality and justice, portraying him as "a poet who offers moral guidance as well as aesthetic pleasure" (230). However, neither critic looks into the stylistic techniques. A closer analysis of these aspects would have provided a more satisfying analysis of his poetry.

Rama Rao Vadapalli VB, in "The Poet-Pilgrim's Progress," describes Sharma as a "poet-pilgrim" navigating a journey of self-discovery. Vadapalli points out Sharma's humour and introspection, while also pointing out that "poetry is a bridge between the personal and the universal" (183). While engaging, the essay might have benefitted from grounding its reflections in specific examples of Sharma's poems, which would give readers a clearer sense of his craftsmanship. Karen J. Head's The "Half-Open Door: Navigating Intention and Interpretation" takes on the titular metaphor of the anthology, examining Sharma's openness to reader interpretation. "The poet begins the journey, but the reader walks through the door," she writes (289), highlighting the collaborative nature of his work. Head's insights are fresh, but her essay could have gone further, probing how Sharma's stylistic ambiguities - his open-ended metaphors, for instance - create space for such collaboration.

Finally, Wendi J. Truran's "The Ambivalence of Belief: Hope and Despair in Susheel Kumar Sharma's *The Door is Half Open*" examines how Sharma balances optimism with the harsh realities of life. "Sharma's poetry walks the line between hope for a better world and an acknowledgment of life's hardships," she notes (265). Truran's essay is heartfelt, but it would have been even stronger with more examples from Sharma's poetry to illustrate this balance.

Sightlines is an exploration of Susheel Kumar Sharma's poetic terrain, an anthology that reveals him as a poet sensitively entrenched in India's cultural psyche yet resolute enough to defy its modern crises. Yet, Sharma's poetic ethos moves beyond a simple reverence for tradition. It revolves around a keen desire to eliminate modernity's excesses. In *Sightlines:*

Indi@logs, Vol 12 (1) 2025, pp 221-232 ISSN 2339-8523

View Points on Susheel Kumar Sharma's The Door is Half Open, the poet stands out as a unique voice in the penumbra of Indian English poetry, drawing inspiration from figures like Rabindranath Tagore and A.K. Ramanujan, nevertheless forging his own path. Much like his distinguished predecessors, Sharma's poetry connects the wisdom of Indian myth, philosophy, and spirituality with the pressing challenges of today, offering a unique perspective on contemporary crises.

The lines quoted from the anthology *The Door is Half-Open* reveal Sharma's lyrical style - both humble and profound. He brings a cadence to his poetry, offering readers something to meditate upon. His verses address his concerns with striking clarity, most notably in his depiction of the Ganges. The polluted and neglected river becomes a potent symbol of ecological collapse, reflecting humanity's alienation from the natural world. We find his work resonating deeply with the ethos of eco-poetry and environmental activism, making his voice a rallying cry for sustainability, a cry for stewardship and healing. For him, poetry is not an escape but a headlong confrontation - a place where the sacredness of life meets its many betrayals. His verses occupy a rare space where ancient tradition merges with modern anxieties, and myth becomes a mirror to reflect the broken realities of our time - gender oppression, the divide of poverty, and the marginalization of vulnerable communities. These themes, though rooted in India's culture, carry universal resonance, echoing struggles for justice worldwide. Sharma's ability to refract the local through a global lens makes his work a rare space where the personal and the political, the spiritual and the material intersect.

Among the critical essays in *Sightlines*, some rise above traditional literary analysis, offering fresh perspectives that deepen our understanding of Sharma's work. Arbind Kumar Choudhary's "Poetic Flavour of Susheel Kumar Sharma" and Kalikinkar Pattanayak's "Ecological Perspectives" are particularly noteworthy. Choudhary likens Sharma's style to that of Charu Sheel Singh, Syed Ameeruddin and K N Daruwalla, while Pattanayak studies how Sharma's ecological concerns intertwine with his spiritual worldview. These essays broaden the scope of critique, inviting readers to see Sharma's poetry as not just literary expression but as profound reflections on existence. They laud Sharma's conception of life and its philosophy. Their essays connect his poems to larger philosophical and ecological discussions, pushing readers to see Sharma not just as a poet but as a thinker whose work is deeply entwined with existential and environmental concerns

Not all the essays, however, achieve this depth. Essays like Pragya Mishra's "An Analysis of Images, Symbols, Metaphors, and Allusions" and Nataša Miladinović's work on symbolism remain solid but limited. Pragya Mishra's "An Analysis of Images, Symbols, Metaphors, and Allusions," while detailed in cataloguing Sharma's techniques, remains in safer, more descriptive territories. She fails to move beyond a surface inventory of devices. Similarly, Nataša Miladinović's essay on symbolism feels somewhat limited, offering description rather than deeper analytical engagement. They focus primarily on cataloging literary devices without going deep into the interpretative richness Sharma's poetry offers. These essays are informative but lack the spark needed to provoke new interpretations or dialogue.

Meanwhile, the interviews with Sharma in the anthology add a more personal layer, allowing readers to see the poet's creative process and his reflections on poetry's transformative role in society. In the collected interviews of *Sightlines*, Susheel Kumar Sharma's voice captures the deeply introspective and inherently communal nature of his poetic craft. In his conversation with Syed Ahmad Raza Abidi, Sharma articulates a vision of poetry as something alive, evolving through its interaction with readers. His metaphor of the "half-open door" appears particularly striking - it underscores his understanding of human comprehension as incomplete, a space where the reader's perspective finishes the creative act. This, in fact, forms a central tenet of Sharma's philosophy: poetry as a shared endeavour, one that transforms through the prism of each reader's cultural and spiritual lens. Sharma argues that this deliberate ambiguity gives his poetry a universality that is not accidental but intentional, reflecting his faith in the diversity of human experience. It is an approach that, at once, democratizes and deepens the reading process. Readers, no matter their cultural context, find echoes of their own lives within his verses, their interpretations shaped by the interplay between personal and collective memory.

When speaking with Danielle Hanson, the editor, Sharma likens the poet to a pilgrim - poetry, for him, is not just an outcome but a journey of self-discovery and spiritual communion. Guided by a sense of wonder, this journey unfolds intuitively, defying rigid structure. Each poem, Sharma suggests, is an offering, a meditative act that strives to bridge the finite with the infinite. The humility inherent in Sharma's reflections - particularly about his role as a poet in contemporary India - further amplifies the ethical and emotional weight of his work. He sees poetry as inseparable from the immediacy of life, as an act of bearing witness rather than

retreating from it. For Sharma, the poetic process is tasked with the duality of mourning the environmental destruction and social injustice - and offering glimpses of renewal. This dual approach holds a mirror to the claims of Indian poetics: art as both spiritual *sadhana* and sociopolitical *dharma*. His work is grounded in Indian philosophy, where ideas like *karma* and *dharma* infuse his worldview. He insists on the connection between the local and the global. His reflections on natural cycles and human duty draw heavily from Hindu cosmology, crafting poetry that feels at once ancient and modern, thus lending his work a spiritual depth, making it timeless yet urgently relevant to the present.

One noticeable limitation of the anthology is its overwhelmingly positive tone, which, while illuminating, restricts the critical engagement with Sharma's poetry. The absence of more critical viewpoints in the anthology feels like a missed opportunity. We would have loved to see essays examining the potential limitations of Sharma's use of mythology or probing into how his poetic forms engage with his themes. These could have added to the vibrant appeal of the discussion. By presenting largely unchallenged praise, *Sightlines* misses opportunities for a more dynamic discussion. For example, critical questions could have explored whether Sharma's reliance on mythological motifs risks alienating contemporary readers. Or how his measured but fluid form either heightens or diminishes the urgency of his themes. These questions, left largely unexplored, create gaps in the critical environment of the anthology.

Even with these limitations, *Sightlines* remains an invaluable contribution to the study of Indian English poetry. One of the greatest strengths of *Sightlines* lies in how it situates Sharma's poetry within both a national and global context. Like the half-open door he so often invokes, Sharma's poetry invites readers into a space of shared introspection and interpretation, where meaning is co-created. The interviews with Sharma in Section B offer a valuable counterweight to these limitations. These conversations reveal Sharma's meticulous approach to crafting poetry and the careful thought behind his work. They also open a window into his personal philosophy, showing how he navigates the intersections of form, meaning, and universality. His reflections are both humanizing and illuminating, offering insights that deepen our understanding of the man behind the poetry.

In the end, *Sightlines* fulfils its metaphorical promise by opening Sharma's "half-closed door," inviting readers to step inside his poetic world. It is a space filled with intellectual and emotional depth, one where tradition and modernity converse freely, and personal struggles find universal resonance. For readers interested in Indian English poetry, eco-poetry, or the

balance between spiritual depth and contemporary urgency, this anthology is both thoughtful and moving. Sharma's poetry, as revealed here, belongs not just to India but to the world, resonating as part of a larger symphony addressing our shared struggles and hopes.

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