

A Tapestry of the Senses: Imagery in *Unwinding Self*

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Abstract

This article explores the multi-faceted function of imagery in Susheel Kumar Sharma's poetry collection, *Unwinding Self* (2020). Departing from a simplistic understanding of imagery as mere poetic ornamentation, this study posits that Sharma's use of a complex array of visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory devices constitutes a core element of his thematic and philosophical inquiry. The imagery, far from being static, is dynamic and often contradictory, serving as a primary vehicle for the poet's trenchant critique of modernity, his profound engagement with spiritual and existential questions, and his exploration of the human condition. Through the systematic juxtaposition of natural and urban landscapes, ancient mythological symbols and contemporary socio-political realities, and the tangible world of everyday objects with the abstract realm of human emotion, Sharma crafts a "kaleidoscopic scenario" that mirrors the complexity of the *Unwinding Self*. This analysis demonstrates how the poet's arresting and often surprising imagery is essential to his project of healing and strengthening the reader by transforming "micro-concrete moments of conflicting life events, into a macro-cosmic experience." Sharma's meticulous sensory tapestry heightens reader attentiveness, deepening engagement with text and reality to fuse aesthetic and ethical purpose.

Keywords: Body Imagery, Ethical Critique, Meta-poetics, Modernity, Mundane Symbolism, Nature vs. Urban, Sensory Poetics, Symbolism.

1. Introduction: The Poetics of Perception

The essence of a poet's craft lies in his ability to translate the amorphous, often overwhelming, data of sensory experience into a structured, resonant, and meaningful form. Imagery, the linguistic medium through which poets evoke mental pictures and sensory details, is the cornerstone of this process. In the hands of a master craftsman like Susheel Kumar Sharma, imagery transcends its role as a mere aesthetic embellishment to become a powerful instrument of philosophical inquiry, emotional resonance, and incisive social critique. Sharma's poetry collection, *Unwinding Self*, offers a rich and compelling case study in this regard. The very title of the volume suggests a process of revelation and unmasking, a stripping away of external layers to expose an inner, often hidden, truth. This process is meticulously mirrored in the poetry itself, where Sharma's vivid and often arresting imagery serves to "unwind" not just the self, but the complex, ambiguous, and frequently contradictory nature of contemporary human existence.

As noted in the insightful afterword by Asun López-Varela, Sharma possesses a rare ability to “capture a kaleidoscopic scenario made up of micro-concrete moments of conflicting life events” and transmute them into a “macro-cosmic experience”(López-Varela122). This alchemical transformation from the specific to the universal is primarily achieved through his nuanced and dynamic handling of imagery. He does not shy away from the granular, often mundane, details of daily life, but rather imbues them with a symbolic weight that allows the particular to speak to a broader, more universal condition. From the serene, silent majesty of a snow-capped mountain peak to the disorienting, honking chaos of urban traffic, from the spiritual profundity of an ancient river to the mundane reality of a coffee cup, Sharma’s imagery is both grounded in the tangible and reaching towards the transcendent. It functions as a vital bridge between the physical and the metaphysical, the external world and the internal psyche.

This article argues that Sharma’s imagery can be systematically categorized and analysed in terms of its thematic function and its sensory manifestations. We will explore how he employs contrasting images to highlight the spiritual and existential dissonance of modernity, how he utilizes symbolic imagery to imbue mundane objects with profound deeper meaning, and how his nature and mythological imagery provides a counter-narrative of timeless tranquillity and spiritual legacy against the backdrop of relentless human turmoil. Ultimately, the study will demonstrate that in *Unwinding Self*, imagery is not merely an aesthetic choice but an integral part of the poet’s ethical and spiritual project—to “heal and strengthen the readers” by making them more sensitive and attentive to the world around them, thereby fostering a deeper, more conscious engagement with their own lives.

2. The Mosaic of the Everyday: The Pervasive Imagery of “Snapshots”

The poem “Snapshots” serves as the foundational text of the collection, and its very structure and content lay the groundwork for Sharma’s fragmented, yet profoundly interconnected, vision. Composed of fifteen short, thematically diverse stanzas, the poem is a montage of images, much like a series of photographs taken in quick succession. This fragmented structure mirrors the disjointed nature of modern life, while the imagery within each snapshot creates a surprisingly cohesive commentary on the human condition. The poem opens with a powerful auditory contrast:

My voice
Empty noise.
Your babble
Enchanting music.
We are God’s creation. (Sharma, lines 1-5)

The speaker's voice is characterized as "empty noise," a negative auditory image that conveys a sense of futility and meaninglessness. In contrast, the other's "babble" is "enchanted music," a positive auditory image that suggests a deep connection and emotional resonance. This simple contrast encapsulates a profound truth about love and communication—that the most insignificant sounds can become beautiful when heard through the lens of affection. This immediate juxtaposition of conflicting images sets the tone for the entire poem.

Subsequent stanzas present a rapid-fire succession of images that blend the personal with the global, the natural with the technological. Stanzas 4 and 5, for instance, create a jarring collision of digital and human suffering:

My email cribbed.
Laid, Layed
Overload, overlayered
Crash, crushed. (Sharma 15-18)

Tsunami hits Japan.
God is resting in Heaven.
Where is my old father?
Emails will be checked later. (Sharma 19-22)

The imagery here shifts from the frustration of digital life ("overload, overlayered," "crash, crushed") to the overwhelming reality of a natural disaster ("Tsunami hits Japan") and the intimate, deeply personal anxiety of family ("Where is my old father?"). This juxtaposition highlights a central theme of the collection: the way global events and personal anxieties are often filtered through the mundane backdrop of technology and daily routine.

The poem continues this mosaic by presenting images from disparate contexts. Stanza 6 uses commercial and media imagery ("Emirates," "cricket," "Lords") to show how pop culture and global business have become a part of our daily thought process, a kind of mental distraction. Stanza 7, in contrast, offers a brief, vivid snapshot of domestic life:

Rising sun
Honking bus
Sleeping baby
Cribbing dad.
That's mom's morning. (Sharma 27-31)

This tableau is a perfect example of Sharma's ability to use a few simple, concrete images to capture a complex reality. The images are sensory and immediate, painting a full picture of the chaotic and tender moments that define a single morning.

Sharma also uses natural and environmental imagery to comment on human actions. The image of the "river has hung / A boulder in its neck" (Stanza 8) is a powerful anthropomorphic image of an ecosystem choked and corrupted by human intervention, a theme echoed in the image of the "withered livelihood" caused by "Green-house reduction" in Stanza 11. Stanza 14 offers a particularly poignant image of a compromised natural world:

Milky froth
Gusty wind
Playing children;
The fish cannot swim. (Sharma 56-59)

The simple, idyllic images of "milky froth" and "playing children" are violently undercut by the final line, a stark and sorrowful declaration that pollution has rendered a natural creature helpless.

Finally, the poem connects this fragmented, modern existence to a grand, spiritual past. Stanza 15 is a profound departure from the preceding domestic and socio-political imagery:

I am Uma.
I am Vishnu.
I am Varanasi.
Where is Bhagiratha? (Sharma 60-63)

Here, the speaker identifies with powerful, timeless images of Hindu mythology and spirituality (Uma, Vishnu, Varanasi), grounding the contemporary self in a deep, historical and religious lineage. The final, rhetorical question – "Where is Bhagiratha?" – is a call for a spiritual saviour, an epic guide who can once again bring the sacred flow of the Ganga (and by extension, spiritual purity) back to a polluted and chaotic world. The imagery in "Snapshots" is thus a microcosm of the entire collection, presenting a fragmented world that is nonetheless yearning for a coherent spiritual identity.

3. The Dissonance of Contrasting Imagery: Nature vs. the Urban

A central and recurrent axis of Sharma's poetic project is the stark juxtaposition of images that represents two fundamentally conflicting worlds: the natural, serene, and ancient, and the urban, chaotic, and modern. This persistent contrast serves as a powerful device to highlight the spiritual and existential anxieties of the contemporary human condition, which is often alienated from its natural and historical roots.

"Chasing a Dream on the Ganges" provides a perfect and poignant illustration of this conflict. The Ganges, or Ganga, is not merely a river but a powerful symbol in the Hindu imagination, associated with purification, spirituality, and ancient traditions. The imagery in the first section of this poem constructs a powerful narrative of desperate devotion and recurrent struggle. The speaker's actions – to "Knock at your door again / At the thick of the night" and "Take on an unknown route / In the pall of every night" – establish a pattern of difficult, nocturnal pilgrimage driven by an inexplicable force. This force is framed by rhetorical questions that seek to identify the core motivation in acts of intimacy and absolution (*kiss, hug, forgiveness, gratitude*), elevating the beloved's door to a site of worship where the speaker must "Pray... Despite discordant notes." The poem shifts dramatically in the final stanza from this intense emotional questioning to a stark physical reality, as the speaker is revealed to be "in rags" and "Facing hailstorm." The environmental hostility is compounded by the confrontation with the beloved's "rage," and this entire drama is fixed upon the specific, turbulent backdrop of the "left bank of Alaknanda," grounding the personal emotional suffering within a vast, sacred, and unforgiving natural landscape. This synthesis of personal emotional catastrophe and monumental geographical setting gives the piece its high-stakes, tragic intensity. However, this earnestness is violently interrupted by a jarring onslaught of urban noise:

But the honking of
Trucks and whizzing
Of cars and speeding
Buses distracted me from
My mantra. (Sharma 52-56)

The harsh, intrusive auditory imagery of "honking" and "whizzing" shatters the visual harmony, introducing a visceral sense of disorientation and spiritual frustration. This conflict between the sacred and the profane, the serene and the frenetic, is a recurring theme throughout the collection, suggesting that the modern world's relentless clamour makes a peaceful, spiritually focused life an increasingly difficult and fractured pursuit. The image of the "mantra," a sacred sound, being interrupted by the profane sound of a truck's horn is a potent metaphor for the spiritual aporia of seeking inner peace in a hyper-materialistic and noisy society.

Similarly, "Distancing" contrasts the precise, objective imagery of geographical data with the messy, subjective reality of human suffering. The poem begins with a scientific, almost clinical description:

When I try to locate Bombay
In my atlas it gives me
19.0760° N, 72.8777° E.

When I look for Mumbai
In my neighbour's it yields
Me the same results. (Sharma 1-6)

This factual, numerical imagery suggests a world that is easily defined, mapped, and understood through a rational, detached lens. However, this neatness is shattered by the raw, emotional image of a disillusioned young man returning from the city:

The boy from my village
Had gone there two years ago;
He has now returned home
With his bandaged arms. (Sharma 8-11)

The tactile imagery of "bandaged arms" introduces a visceral sense of injury, loss, and broken dreams. This imagery stands in stark opposition to the sterile data of the atlas, revealing that while the city's geographical location may not have changed, its reality – the lived experience of its inhabitants – is one of disillusionment and failure. The poet's concluding question, "How will he eat his food?" is a poignant rhetorical query that grounds the abstract concept of urban failure in a concrete, physical image of an individual's inability to perform a basic function.

Another striking example of this contrasting imagery appears in the poem "On Reading Langston Hughes's 'Theme for English B'". Here, the contrast is not between nature and the urban, but between an intellectual ideal and a grim reality. The poet's persona describes a person who has come to him "...like a bird / Looking for a place / To make its nest" (Sharma 16-18).

This image of hopeful fragility is juxtaposed with the harsh reality of the individual's life when the poet further describes the condition of the persona after his son's death who was looking "Dull and morose / As if he was weary / Of a long walk" (Sharma 30-32).

The tactile imagery of a "long walk" and the visual of a "dull and morose" face ground the emotional pain in a physical, tangible exhaustion. The contrast between the initial hopeful image of the bird and the final image of a person weary of life underscores the disillusionment and suffering that the persona is observing.

4. The Symbolism of the Mundane: Objects as Metaphors

A hallmark of Sharma's poetics is his unique ability to imbue everyday objects with profound symbolic meaning. He masterfully turns the mundane into the metaphysical, allowing common things to function as a potent language for abstract ideas such as identity, memory, and the human psyche.

The poem "Coffee" exemplifies this technique with remarkable subtlety. The seemingly simple process of brewing and drinking coffee becomes a powerful metaphor for the distillation of memories and the complexities of human relationships. The poem begins with a straightforward sensory image:

I am stirring my memories
In the cup of coffee
Clockwise and anti-clockwise
Sometimes slowly,
Sometimes passionately,
Sometimes briskly." (Sharma 1-6)

The act of stirring, a simple physical action, is transformed into a metaphorical stirring of memory and emotion. The central image of stirring memories in a cup of coffee serves as a powerful controlling metaphor that visualizes the abstract process of recollection. Memories, which are formless thoughts, are treated as a tangible substance being actively manipulated within the concrete, everyday vessel of the coffee cup. This act of "stirring" introduces kinetic imagery, specified by the alternating motions of "Clockwise / and anti-clockwise," suggesting a thorough and perhaps non-linear turning over of the past. The addition of adverbs like "slowly," "passionately," and "briskly" layers emotional and cognitive texture onto the physical movement, revealing that the process of introspection is not mechanical but varies in intensity and speed, reflecting the nature of the thoughts being brought to the surface. The coffee cup is no longer just a vessel; it is a repository of personal history, a crucible where the past and present are mixed. The poem's central question, "Can good coffee be brewed / Without any whirling?" suggests a deeper truth about life: that it, like coffee, requires "whirling" – turmoil, conflict, and agitation—to achieve a deep and satisfying essence. The gustatory imagery of "good coffee" is therefore not just about taste, but about the quality of a life well-lived, a life that has embraced and processed its own turbulences.

Similarly, in the poem "Buy Books, Not Diamonds," the images of "books" and "diamonds" are used as powerful symbols for two competing value systems. The diamonds, with their cold, hard visual imagery, represent the materialism and superficiality of modern consumer culture. The poem utilizes a dense array of sensory, symbolic, and political imagery to deconstruct the value of the diamond. The poem initially focuses on tactile and conceptual imagery, defining the diamond not by its visual lustre but as mere "carbon / Hardened to the core" – a substance "Hard enough to cut glass." This is immediately contrasted with the powerful visual imagery of the "redness of the queen of spades," which symbolically trumps the "Nine radiant diamonds" in emotional or fateful significance. The setting shifts to a relentless, futile subterranean search, described with visual imagery as an "endless," "rabbit hole without water." The work then incorporates harsh auditory imagery – the deafening noise of "Kimberlite

crushers," which ironically silences the sounds of violence, making the children unable to hear "war-cries." Finally, the poem employs potent symbolic imagery by applying "soothing hands" and "ointments" – representing superficial aid – to the wounds of the exploited, paralleling Christ "Hung on the cross." The abstract state of "Hunger" is given a relentless presence through forceful repetition, underscoring the unending suffering that sustains the relentless search for diamonds.

5. The Human Body and the Self: A Site of Imagery

Sharma's imagery extends beyond the external world to the human body itself, using it as a central site for exploring themes of identity, vulnerability, and resilience. The body is not just a physical form but a canvas on which the complexities of the human psyche are inscribed.

In the poem "Hands" the poet uses the image of hands as a symbol of labour, devotion, and love. The father's hands are described with simple, yet evocative, tactile imagery: "My father's hands are Coloured / With his hands he also mends us." This image immediately conveys a sense of hard work, sacrifice, and the dignity of physical toil. However, the same hands are then described in a different, more spiritual context: "The same hands go up in the sky in gratitude / To the One who had sent him here" (Sharma 2-3). The image of hands raised in prayer transforms them from tools of labour to vessels of devotion. This contrast highlights the duality of human existence, where the mundane and the spiritual are inextricably linked. The hands become a central symbol of the self, capable of both physical exertion and spiritual connection.

The poem "Wearing the Scarlet Letter 'A'" uses the central image of the scarlet letter to symbolize public shame and defiance. This is a direct intertextual reference to Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel, but Sharma re-contextualizes the symbol within a modern and Indian framework. The visual imagery of the "scarlet letter 'A'" on a woman's chest is a powerful symbol of condemnation, but the poem's speaker reclaims it and says "I stood strong without any protest / Not to prove God wrong (Sharma 14-15)." This re-appropriation of the image transforms a mark of disgrace into a symbol of defiance and resilience. The body becomes a site of protest, where the branded self asserts its dignity in the face of societal judgment.

The poem "Bubli Poems" is particularly rich in imagery related to the female body and its struggle with societal expectations. The name "Bubli" itself, suggesting a "bubbling" enthusiasm, is a sensory image that contrasts with the harsh realities the girl faces. Her journey is narrated through images of physical transformation and entrapment. The poem describes her "dancing moves" and "flowing hair," visual images of youthful energy and freedom. However, this is contrasted with images of her being confined and controlled: "The father tried to make her believe / She was a sinner (Sharma 83-84)." by quoting

from Deuteronomy. This verbal image of the father's words acts as an act of physical and mental constraint. Bubl's eventual desire for "Mukti (liberation from the circle of life) and Moksha (freedom from Samsara or material world)" is a powerful spiritual image that shows her journey from physical desire to a search for ultimate freedom.

6. The Imagery of Creation: The Poetics of "The Unborn Poem"

In "The Unborn Poem", Sharma presents a fascinating meta-poetic inquiry into the very process of literary creation. The imagery here is not just descriptive but fundamentally analytical, functioning as a surreal and satirical commentary on the aporia of the artist.

The poem opens with a startlingly mundane, yet profoundly metaphorical, image: the speaker is "looking for a plumber / To check the leaking of symbols (Sharma 1-2)." The act of plumbing, a blue-collar trade, is juxtaposed with the elevated task of poetry, immediately grounding the creative process in a realm of practical problem-solving. This mechanical imagery of "leaking symbols" and "The tank / up above in the sky" frames the creative source not as a mystical, ineffable fount, but as a fallible system in need of repair. This is a wry commentary on the romantic notion of a muse, suggesting that inspiration is as prone to mundane failure as a household fixture.

The surreal, almost alchemical, imagery continues in the following stanza, where the creative process is likened to an afternoon tea:

When images have to be
Boiled along with rhyme
And rhythm to be served
With cookies laced with
Black and bitter-sweet
Like chokola memories. (Sharma 7-12).

Here, the abstract elements of poetry – images, rhyme, rhythm – are transformed into the tactile and gustatory ingredients of a domestic ritual. This culinary imagery highlights the poet's role as a kind of chef, blending disparate elements into a consumable product. The "black and bitter-sweet" quality of the "chokola memories" is a rich sensory detail that powerfully conveys the duality of remembrance – the past is a complex mix of both pain and sweetness. The poem then shifts to a more chaotic, urban imagery to describe the writer's block:

The traffic jam of emotions
Lines –sweet and sour
And the collision of ideas

Don't let the pen move. (Sharma 13-16)

This vivid, kinetic imagery of a "traffic jam" and "collision" turns the internal turmoil of the writer into a physical, external gridlock. The pen, a simple writing tool, is personified as a vehicle that is literally unable to move forward, paralyzed by the overwhelming rush of conflicting thoughts. This image viscerally conveys the frustration and paralysis that accompanies creative blocks.

The final images are a mix of absence and potential. The poem that cannot be written "remains a mirror, / A shadow, a mirage, a stain (Sharma 17-18)." This series of visual images defines the "unborn poem" by what it is not – a solid, complete object. It is merely a reflection of something, a faint outline, an illusion, or a permanent mark of failure. The paper, however, retains a sense of hope: "The unsoiled paper / Has silver hopes (Sharma 21-22)." This image of the clean page holds the promise of future creation. The final, stark image, "The epitaph needs / To precede / The poem," is a profound and unsettling statement. The epitaph, a marker for the dead, suggests that the struggle to create is a kind of death, or that a final reckoning is required before a truly meaningful work can be born. It is a striking and memorable image that encapsulates the profound existential struggle at the heart of the creative process.

7. The Symbolism of a Life: The Imagery of "The Soul with a New Hat"

The poem "The Soul with a New Hat" offers a poignant and extended metaphor that uses the simple image of candles to explore the complexities of a life's journey. This central image is a powerful vehicle for discussing themes of purpose, endurance, and the intertwined nature of individual and communal existence.

The poem begins with the image of a gift, a "packet of candles" received from the speaker's father. The gift of "thirty candles" symbolizes life itself – a start, but an insufficient one. The speaker's need for "sixty more" is a clear metaphor for the effort required to build a full and meaningful life beyond its initial, given form. The act of "Kindling them one by one" is a visual representation of living life deliberately, lighting each day or phase with intention. This imagery frames life as a series of conscious, purposeful acts rather than a passive experience.

The central conflict of the poem is conveyed through the active, kinetic image of "gushes of wind" that cause some of the candles to be "blown out." This represents the inevitable setbacks, tragedies, and challenges that threaten to extinguish one's purpose. However, the poem offers a hopeful counter-image: the candles are "rekindled" by various family members—the "wife," the "son," the "younger brother," and the "sister." This imagery beautifully illustrates the essential role of loved ones in providing support and helping one to survive life's inevitable storms. The metaphor of a communal effort

to keep the flame alive is deeply moving and speaks to the interdependence of the human experience.

The imagery of the candles' end is particularly striking. The line "Spreading light was dearer / Than shedding molten wax" creates a powerful visual and tactile contrast. It contrasts the noble purpose of providing light to others with the personal cost of doing so (the wax, a symbol of personal resources and well-being). This image of self-sacrifice is a profound statement about the nature of a life well-lived. The final, unsettling image of the "last candle consumed" leads to the visual of a "dark tunnel" that the speaker has left behind, a backward glance at the struggles endured. The poem's concluding lines introduce the image of an enveloping "fog" that is consuming the self "I ow I y." This fragmented word, with its deliberate spaces, visually enacts the slow, creeping darkness of the end of life, mirroring the gradual fading of the flame.

Through the sustained metaphor of the candle, Sharma turns a simple object into a profound meditation on existence, showing how individual purpose, external challenges, and the support of community converge to define a human journey.

8. The Imagery of Resistance: The Soul vs. The City

In "Rechristening the City," Sharma introduces a powerful set of images that pits the enduring, natural world against the fleeting, artificial constructs of humanity. The poem serves as a fierce and spiritual call to resistance, using a series of sharp contrasts to highlight the futility of human hubris in the face of timeless reality. The central tension is established immediately with the speaker's assertion:

You may call me by whatever name
You wish to. I am the consciousness
I am the reality, I am the water,
I am the land. (Sharma 2-5)

The poet uses the image of "names" and "books" – symbols of human categorization and control – to contrast them with the elemental, unchanging images of "consciousness," "reality," "water," and "land." This distinction argues that while humans can change superficial labels, they cannot alter the fundamental nature of things. The poem's imagery suggests that the city's true identity is not in its name, but in the ground and water it is built upon. The poet then uses a series of natural, cyclical images to reinforce this point: "The rains will fall as ever / The hot winds will blow as ever / Winters will be severe as ever (Sharma 10-12)." These images of timeless meteorological patterns serve as a counter-argument to man's fleeting attempts at control.

Sharma provides a powerful counter-image to this spiritual imprisonment: the "Akshya Vat," a sacred, indestructible banyan tree in Hindu tradition. The poet urges the

reader to "Stand up like the Akshya Vat / Against all poison." This image is a symbol of spiritual endurance, an unyielding anchor in a chaotic world. The line "Deserts need camels, not planes (Sharma 26)." utilizes powerful metaphorical imagery to articulate the principles of contextual appropriateness and compositional necessity. The first couplet, "Deserts need camels, not planes," establishes a conceptual contrast between the suitability of the resilient, earthbound camel and the ineffectiveness of the advanced, detached airplane, symbolizing the failure of a solution that is technically sophisticated yet fundamentally ill-adapted to the environment. This analogy is a recast of "Do not use sword in place of needle." This is followed by the core imagery of the "watermelon" which also provides a nuanced conclusion. This gustatory, visual and tactile imagery suggests that life is not just about a single, pure element (water/spirituality), but about a rich, colourful, and complex blend of experiences. Here, *water* represents the basic, singular requirement, while the necessary addition of *pulp, sugar, strips, and colours* symbolizes the indispensable need for complexity, substance, aesthetic form, and appeal to achieve a successful and complete outcome. It is also a call to embrace both the spiritual and the material, but with the understanding that the former is the true source of life, while the latter adds a necessary, but ultimately secondary, richness. Thus, the imagery collectively critiques oversimplification, arguing for the necessity of both contextual wisdom and multifaceted substance in any endeavour.

9. A Voice and a Lament: Sensory Imagery of Loss and Hope

The poems "Thus Spake a Woman" and "A Voice" are deeply personal and use a rich, multi-sensory palette to explore themes of identity, suffering, and the creative process itself. "Thus, Spake a Woman" is a powerful four-part meditation on love, freedom, and cultural identity. Part I, "A Dreamer," blends visual, auditory, and tactile imagery to evoke a moment of blissful intimacy. The visual images of "a thousand suns" and "deep red roses" create a warm, vibrant backdrop. This is beautifully fused with the auditory imagery of the "violin" and "harmonium," which not only create music but also "stirred my heart," making the sound an internal, kinetic force. This is further enhanced by the tactile imagery of being "held...in your arms," a physical sensation of comfort and safety. The "lull" that creates a "storm in my heart" is a masterful use of synaesthesia, where a peaceful quiet evokes a violent, internal emotion.

Part II, "Fracas," shifts to more visceral and defiant imagery. The visual image of the "bird of a cage" is a powerful symbol of entrapment. The kinetic, aggressive imagery of the "ant" and its bite on the keeper's nose, making it "red and... bleed," is a striking visualization of a small act of rebellion against an overwhelming force. The poet's determination that her dream will not be "Snowed and buried / In the heap of broken images" is a potent visual metaphor for the death of hope.

Part III, "The Cracked World," uses a unique form of imagery – the imagery of absence. The poem's sense of dislocation and alienation is created by the lack of expected visual and auditory experiences: "no sycamores," "no autumn," "no nightingales," and "no coral reefs." This vacuum of sensory input highlights a sense of cultural and spiritual deprivation. This is contrasted with the tactile and gustatory imagery of gifts like "cloves, honey, curd, milk," and the olfactory image of "jasmynes, roses," which represent offerings that are not accepted. The poem thus uses sensory deprivation to highlight a deeper spiritual and cultural fracture.

Part IV, "A Lament," is a raw, emotional piece rich in tactile and emotional imagery. The speaker's pain is made physical through the imagery of "nauseating pills," "harrowing hospitals," and the "foul smelling doctors." The tactile image of being held by "two unknown women" in the Ganges is a powerful symbol of a life saved, while the shivering from the cold and the subsequent "quiver" from seeing her husband are visceral expressions of trauma and relief. The final visual of the "high rise buildings" and "winding stairs" serves as a stark backdrop to a tragedy that the speaker, despite enduring her own suffering, could not prevent.

"A Voice" uses imagery to explore the intersection of technology, sensuality, and creativity. Part I uses kinetic imagery to describe the process of writing a poem on a computer. The "cursor shifts quickly" and the "movement of the cursor" is compared to the "swift" movement of fingers across a lover's body, a powerful and surprising juxtaposition of technological and tactile imagery. The visual of the "small bed" on the screen and the subsequent "blank" screen after a power failure are images that represent the promise of creation and its sudden, frustrating demise.

In Part II, the imagery becomes more philosophical. The auditory and tactile imagery of "Thudding hearts" and "Drumming minds" portrays the internal chaos of thought. The powerful image of the artist creating a poem "From a stone / In the burning sun / With no water / Anywhere around" is a visual and tactile metaphor for the difficulty of creation in a barren, uninspiring environment. The final, abstract questions about the colour and weight of the "seven horses" and the ability of "clouds" to carry water are visual metaphors for the mysteries of inspiration and grace, which the speaker admits are unanswerable, leaving the reader with a sense of profound, spiritual questioning.

10. "Kabir's Chadar": The Sensory, Transparent, Pure, Symbolic and Organic Sheets: Susheel uses the technique of contrast in his "Kabir's Chadar" to highlight the central metaphor, "chadar" (shawl or sheet), for moral life and reputation. The legendary Indian mystic poet Kabir lived in 15th century. He composed a poetic hymn about human body (symbolised by sheet/ shawl) which is fragile, and transient in a metaphoric language, (*Jheenijheenibeeneechadariya* the tapestry is very finely-spun). Kabir questions the materials used to weave it, asking what the warp and weft are, and from

what threads the shroud was woven, alluding to its divine creation and the interconnectedness of all things. Susheel Sharma uses the same imagery and metaphor but gives it altogether a different meaning.

In Kabir's poem, the sheet represents human body which consists of five elements which after death go to mix with the respective element. The five elements alone do not constitute a body. They are coupled with some energy channels (*Nadis*) of *prana* too. In the *Yogashastra* it is said that there are 72,000 *nadis* which spring forth from three basic *nadis* – the left, the right and the central – the *Ida*, *Pingala*, and *Sushumna*. One dies because this energy channels get dried up or are blocked. While describing the process of life and death, Kabir claims in his hymn that he has used his body and life in such a manner that all these elements are being returned without any contamination. There is no direct reference to Karma in Kabir's poem. However, Susheel's poem brings in one's actions (*karma*) into play. Hindus believe in the Karma theory according to which no one can remain without performing an action (*karma*) even for a moment and all beings act according to the qualities born of their material nature (the three *gunas*). The action (*karma*) includes movement of our (physical) bodies as well as the (mental/metaphysical) movement of our thoughts. While the speaker's actions in Susheel's poem leave indelible marks to spoil his sheet/ shawl, Kabir's actions do not leave any mark on his sheet. The persona in Susheel's poem is quite intrigued with this metaphysical question. This dilemma is highlighted with proper use of images, symbols and metaphors in the poem.

The effectiveness of Susheel's poem lies on the sensory and symbolic properties of the two chadars in the poem. While the speaker's chadar is indicative of the life of deception, Kabir's represents the life of purity. The speaker's chadar is described through visual and tactile imagery (thickness, dark but shining colours) to symbolize a life carefully constructed with worldly sophistication and complexity, designed to naturally conceal moral corruption. "Thickly woven" indicates a life that is complex, materialistic, and carefully constructed. The *dark, shining colours* represent worldly allure, sophistication, and hidden flaws. The colours are not purely dark (sinful) but *shining* (attractive), allowing sins to be concealed. The concealment of moral corruption is made explicit through vivid symbolic imagery, where ethical failings like the "blood stains of abortion (activity with no outer marks)" and "burn marks of jealousy (an inner feeling)" go visually unnoticed. Conversely, Kabir's white chadar symbolizes transparency and purity, making its inevitable small errors (a spot or two) highly visible and subject to scrutiny, even by a blind observer – a hyperbole underscoring the scrutiny faced by the truly honest. The eventual appearance of olfactory imagery is indicated in expressions like: "smelling foul in / My closed house after the rains." This shift to smell is crucial. It represents the point where hidden corruption (the sins) becomes so great that it can no

longer be contained or masked by the external simulation, manifesting as a foul odour – the stench of internal guilt or accumulated decay – despite the chadar’s visual success. The *closed house* symbolizes the speaker’s isolated inner world. Expressions like “blood stains of abortion,” “burn marks of jealousy,” and “blotches of over-ambition” are symbolic. They are also the core metaphors for moral failings, sins, and vices. The imagery is visceral (blood, burn marks) and abstract (infamy, calumny). The pattern and dark colours of the chadar symbolize the ability of a complex, socially acceptable façade to absorb and hide these transgressions, keeping the wearer’s public image “spotless.” While “Kabir’s [chadar] was white,” is indicative of visual imagery, “A white one has its own perils” is symbolic. White is the traditional symbol of purity, innocence, and truth. The *peril* is that in a corrupt world, purity is easily tainted. The whiteness makes even a small flaw (a spot or two) immediately visible and judged. Symbolism and judgment are indicated in the lines:

It gets a spot or two
Which are pointed out
Even by a blind from a distance. (Sharma 13-15)

The spot symbolizes minor or unavoidable human error. The extreme sensitivity to staining symbolizes the transparency and vulnerability of a truly honest life. The hyperbolic detail that even a *blind person* can see the spot emphasizes the intensity of external scrutiny and judgment faced by the pure.

The imagery in the poem is highly appropriate and conveys meaning organically by physically manifesting abstract moral and ethical concepts through an extended allegory. The core abstract ideas (sin, purity, reputation) are never stated directly but are entirely embodied by the physical properties of the cloth (colour, pattern, thickness, stain-resistance). The chadar is an organic, consistent representation of the wearer’s moral identity. The speaker is “cheated” by the washing machine and commercial soap (symbolizing easy fixes or societal attempts at absolution). The ultimate failure of the modern washing process and the previous foul smell reinforce the idea that profound moral decay and corruption cannot be cleansed by superficial or commercial means; it leads to the final rhetorical question (“Does the clue lie in / Thinness or whiteness?”) that summarizes the central conflict in the poem: whether the key to purity lies in the “Thinness or whiteness” of one’s life. Whiteness is purity and transparency, leading to accountability. Thinness (Kabir’s original chadar) can imply a life unburdened by material complexities, making the return to its original state (purity) possible. The poem critiques the speaker’s chosen path. The poem thus reveals that a complex, colourful, and thick life is inherently designed to hide its own corruption, making true redemption nearly

impossible. The poet slantly suggests the redemption lies in bringing in a radical internal change, as exemplified by Kabir.

11. Conclusion: The Painter's Hand and the Unwinding Self

In conclusion, Susheel Kumar Sharma's *Unwinding Self* emerges as a profound testament to the power of imagery as the primary vehicle for poetic exploration and ethical engagement. This analysis has demonstrated that Sharma's imagery is far more than ornamental; it is the very fabric through which the complexities of the modern self, the dissonances of contemporary existence, and the yearning for spiritual coherence are woven. By systematically categorizing and examining the diverse manifestations of imagery – from the fragmented snapshots of daily life and the stark contrasts between nature and urbanity, to the potent symbolism of mundane objects, the visceral exploration of the body, the meta-poetic musings on creation, the calls for resistance, and the intricate moral allegories – we uncover a meticulously crafted tapestry of the senses. Each image, whether auditory, visual, tactile, gustatory, or olfactory, functions not in isolation but as part of an interconnected network, building layers of meaning that resonate far beyond the immediate sensory experience.

Sharma's masterful use of imagery achieves several crucial ends. Firstly, it bridges the tangible and the transcendent, grounding abstract philosophical inquiries about identity, morality, suffering, and hope in concrete, sensory details that evoke immediate emotional and intellectual responses. Secondly, it serves as a powerful tool for social critique, exposing the alienation, environmental degradation, spiritual emptiness, and ethical compromises inherent in contemporary life, often through jarring juxtapositions and symbolic transformations. Thirdly, it fulfills a deeply ethical and spiritual purpose, as articulated in the collection's aim to "heal and strengthen the readers." By demanding heightened attentiveness to the world – the honking bus disrupting a mantra, the fish unable to swim in polluted froth, the bandaged arms of the returned migrant, the symbolic weight of a coffee cup or a diamond – Sharma's imagery fosters a deeper consciousness. It compels readers to confront uncomfortable realities, question prevailing values, and reconnect with both their internal landscapes and the external world with greater sensitivity and awareness.

Ultimately, *Unwinding Self* stands as a significant contribution to contemporary Indian English poetry, showcasing how imagery, when wielded with such precision, versatility, and depth, becomes the essential language for navigating the intricate labyrinth of modern existence. Sharma's poetic project, enacted through this rich tapestry of sensory and symbolic imagery, is not merely to depict the world but to actively engage with it, to "unwind" its layers, and to offer, through heightened perception, a path towards greater understanding, resilience, and perhaps even redemption. His work firmly establishes

imagery as the cornerstone of a poetics that is simultaneously aesthetically rich, philosophically rigorous, and ethically imperative.

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