

QUEST FOR TRUTH: A JOURNEY OF SELF -DISCOVERY IN TWO MIRRORS AT THE ASHRAM

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ABSTRACT

Shiv K Kumar, an academician turned writer has established himself as one of the major poets of Postcolonial Indian English Literature. His novel Two mirrors at the Ashram presents a psychological experiment with truth. A godman and an atheistic creative writer find their inner self reflected in each other's mirror of soul and get purified of their subterfuges. This paper focuses on how the quest for truth ends in self -discovery.

KEYWORDS: Subterfuges, Quest, Self-Discovery

Shiv K. Kumar is an all rounder having eight volumes of poems, five novels, two translations, two short story collections and a play to credit. He is a winner of the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for his poetic collection *Trapfalls in the Sky*. He has been awarded Padma Bhushan in 2001 for his contribution to Indian English Literature. Kumar's works are born out of personal experience of pain and agony. They present varied themes of love, sex, companionship, their limitation, failure, consequent suffering, death, cultural conflict and exploration of self. His fifth novel *Two mirrors at the Ashram* presents a psychological experiment with truth. It is the fictionization of a man's discovery of his inner self behind his masks. A godman and an atheistic creative writer find their inner self reflected in each other's mirror of soul and get purified of their subterfuges. This novel also presents the religious imperialism of modern sadhus and babas in the present days.

Shiv K Kumar's fifth novel *Two Mirrors at the Ashram* portrays the contemporary modern 'wasteland' where values of honesty, piety, truthfulness and commitment are overlooked in favour of selfish motives. It also focuses on the religious imperialism of modern sadhus and babas in the ashrams. This novel is a triumph of true humanism over fake spiritualism. It presents a symbolic struggle against the collapse of morality by wiping out the dust from the mirror of man's soul.

Rajesh Sahni, is a skeptical, hard drinking creative writer. He approaches 'Shanti Niwas' (the abode of peace), an ashram at Mullagarhi, near Vellore in Tamil Nadu to pull himself out of his malaise. Rajesh is an agnostic, dipsomaniac, philanderer and womanizer. He usually debunks the godmen as villains in his novels and short stories. Though Rajesh doesn't believe in God and Godmen, he visits the ashram on the advice of his friend Bharat. Generally people have high regard for godmen and their preachings. The swamiji in

the novel is also considered a unique "yogi, philosopher, and humanist all in one" (2). The ashramites think that the swamiji is an ageless man. He may be of eighty to hundred and ten. But Rajesh has a clear view of persons and events. He correctly places him around fifty.

Generally, godmen claim to preach the truths of life. But they preach just metaphysical ideas which are beyond the comprehension of common people. Their speech is loaded with platitudes from sastras. They are hypocrites. They do not practise what they themselves preach. The swamiji of the ashram 'Shanti Niwas,' is a pervert and is unable to leash his carnal desires. The drunkard writer Rajesh is a contrast to his character. Though he is liberal in his ways of life, Rajesh is practical and true to his conscience. When the swamiji offers a discourse on truth, Rajesh thinks to himself, "I have lied all the way through my life. But when I write, it's all truth, nothing but truth." (3).

Like most of the godmen of the present days, the swamiji is not true to himself. His piety is deceptive. He gives dispassionate discourses on high sounding subjects like religion and spirituality. But inwardly he is entertaining his carnal desires. Even when he is quoting from the Gita, his eyes are leering at Susan, an exquisite foreign beauty, one of his ardent disciples. Rajesh, being a creative writer with a sense of keen perception, reflects swamiji's mind. The narrator says "I saw the swami's eyes linger on the foreigner in the third row. As he continued chanting mantras from the Gita, his gaze kept returning to her, resting on her breasts. "It was a perfect balancing act of the object, the mind and the spoken word" (4). His hypocrisy is fully revealed when he makes self-indulgence with Susan in his fantasy behind the bush near the lake. He cries in rapture "So...Soo...Oh Sue, Darling... Now you come over, my dove... yes! yes! Keep swinging... yes that was wonderful!" (21). But immediately after all his passion for Susan is spent, the swamiji realizes his sin,

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he repents for his act. He gives out an anguished cry, loud and clear. "Help me, O God! Is it the devil within me? Help me p-l-e-a-s-e!" (ibid). When the narrator asks the swamiji about his leering at Susan, he resents at him angrily saying "You have a dirty mind- a depraved man you are, gloating over flesh" (31). But when the narrator exposes the bitter truth about the swami's conduct and emphasizes the importance of truth that only a truthful soul can reach God fearlessly at anytime, he admits his sin. He makes an open confession that he is also at times a slave to passion.

The swamiji who usually gives high sounding preachings and prayers, has understood that self analysis is much more rewarding than the hollow words of prayer. He shares it with Rajesh "I had a long session with myself... You know, I have to believe that while praying is only asking for favours, self analysis is much more rewarding" (ibid). The need of human life is to look within and identify one's true self. Soul is the only bright mirror in which the true reflection of one's inner self can be found. Now Rajesh and the swamiji have become two mirrors reflecting each other. Their mutual openness to each other finally brings them closer and they unlock hearts and share the secrets of their past. They even confess about their first love. They identify themselves each other for both have passed through similar fires of life.

They become fellow travelers in the path of detachment, withdrawal and self control. They both travel to the USA and England to participate in various ceremonies. They encountered naked truth of human nature return to the ashram as harmonized souls. Initially Rajesh has been an atheist. He has indulged in blasphemy. But when his mother falls sick with a heart problem, he prays to God for his mother's life. He promises to renounce all his wanton ways of life- liquor, meat and women. He truly sticks on to the vows even after his friends' constant temptation and teasing. He does not yield to the temptation of the naked splendor of Kulvinder, one of his beautiful women at his house in Delhi during the riots that followed India Gandhi's assassination. Contemplating on death has transformed his interest in the transient pleasures of worldly life. After the harrowing experience of the "near death" of his mother and witnessing the death of Mullah Ram and Bharat, Raj has lost excitement in liquor and sex. He realizes that 'there are higher regions to explore, far more exciting journeys into one's inner self" (205).

Rajesh, who has been a womanizer, has become completely detached from the thoughts of

women. When Susan comes to meet Rajesh, he takes it as the typhoon of passion that came to test his spiritual strength. Here he passes the test of complete detachment. He remains strong and steady in his vow of self control and withdrawal and turns her away. Susan goes back frustrated as he talks of detachment and self-control. Ultimately, Rajesh, a lecherous philanderer, 'a mortal who has savoured all kinds of sins', has renounced all his outposts of love, lust- Sakeena, Neera, Kulvinder, Susan- far behind and moves ahead as an enlightened person.

The narrator is uninhibitedly honest about his weakness. He admits his failures with openness of mind to perceive the true spirit of things. That's why she succeeds in exposing the frailties of the ashramites including the swamiji. It is only the narrator who identifies the mental trauma that the swamiji undergoes after his fantasy with Susan. Swamiji becomes stripped before the mirror of the narrator's mind. The encounter with the cobra in the first chapter symbolizes facing one's conscience. The cobra is only a node of consciousness. When all the ashramites including the swamiji are scared to face the cobra, it is only Rajesh who faces the cobra. It reveals Rajesh's inner strength and courage to face his own self and truth. It proves that he is true to his conscience. Here the cobra stands for fear of truth, lust and death.

The very opening line of the novel "Satyameva Jayate", ultimately bears significance. The whole story is about the two men's quest for truth. When the swamiji utters 'Satyameva Jayate' during his prayer meetings, it is ironical that he is not true to himself. People go to ashrams for enlightenment and to dispel their mental darkness. But the swamiji himself is in darkness. It's only Raj's truthfulness that brightens the dark corners of his soul. At the same time, it is only the swamiji's honest admission of his sin that transforms the narrator who has otherwise been living in a Bohemian world. Both the swamiji and the narrator steer each other to a life based on truth, far from worldly vices. It is here that they see the two mirrors which reflect their images. One image shows the superficial selves lost in the world of unending earthly desires while the other reveals the stark truth of their inner being.

Despite his physical contact with many women, Rajesh Sahni does not lend himself to any woman. He keeps himself detached from any woman. He is loyal to only one woman - his mother. When he seduces Susan, it is only to score over the swamiji. The only truth that he perceives is creative writing. Kumar

has used 'mirror' as a symbol of human soul. When the swamiji gives a talk on lust, he says "If you look into the mirror of your soul, most of you will see nothing but lust, your carnal desires crawling all over its surface, like stinging bees" (3). He reiterates the idea that man's greatest enemy is lust. Human desire is the cause of all suffering and worldly pleasure spoils the soul of a man. As the Freudian theory implies all human actions are based on lust. No man can escape it. The swamiji, while offering a high -sounding oration on 'detachment' and chanting mantras, he is leering at the young foreigner Susan Heywood.

At the beginning of the novel, both the narrator and the swamiji seem to be contradictory characters but towards the end they emerge as complementary figures. But when the swamiji makes a candid confession saying "when I stared at her twice ...I had in fact stripped her in my mind's eye" (75). Rajesh is stunned at his openness and admits him as his spiritual mentor. Rajesh tells the swamiji, "Now I accept you as my Guru, swamiji...At one stroke, you have redeemed yourself and demolished all my reservations. I shall now respect you hereafter as my mentor" (ibid). But the swamiji realizes that just one confession will not absolve one of one's sins...we must atone for our sins with constant penance" (76). He considers his frank confession only as the beginning of a long and arduous journey. He accepts Rajesh as his fellow traveler in his journey of spiritual life. But the narrator is aware that his soul is stained and he is true and honest only in his writings. His primary aim is writing. He is serious and truthful only when he is writing. He himself says, "I don't relish seriousness in real life. I am always out to entertain myself, except when I am writing"(45). The writer adds "I can't look in the mirror of my soul. It's frightfully stained. I can face myself only in my writing" (78).In the narrator's opinion whoever repress their natural instincts and desires are sick. Thus, the ashram looks like a psychiatric clinic, packed with patients. He himself has shed his mental anguish in his writing.

Art is a mirror that can reflect the true face of reality, both social and psychic, with utmost fidelity to truth. To achieve this, the artist must have courage and vision to peep into the hidden selves of men and explore the deeper realities without inhibition. An artist's mind does not reserve anything. He gives a full vent to his desires in his writing. So his mind is crystal clear like the lake's water. That's why the mirror of the writer -narrator's soul is clearer than that of swamiji's. At the end, the mirror of swamiji's character gets totally

cleaned when he identifies lust as a 'subtle flame' and admits in public the occasional bouts of passion in him. He confesses, "For that matter, I may confess that even I feel cheated by passion at times..." (212). With this strength of truth in his mind he moves to the refinement of his impulses within himself and gradually moves away from desire to peace and affirmation. As a result, detachment and withdrawal become the keynote of next discourse at Mullagahri. Rajesh, the agnostic writer feels an irrepressible urge to pray and surrender his will to God. He gets lost in the prayer

"Let there be peace on this earth,

Peace un the atmosphere,

Peace for every departed soul.

...Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti!"(223).

Ultimately it is proved that one has to come to terms with one's own inner self to look into the mirror of one's own soul. Through the character of the writer-narrator Rajesh, Kumar has proved that art is a divine means to practice spirituality and bold and fearless truth is the only thing that leads to God. Thus Kumar has used 'mirror' as a metaphor to refer to the soul of the writer-narrator that reflect each other's character. In the process of quest for truth, the narrator not only identifies the real nature and the darkness lurking in the personality of the swamiji but also he realizes his own limitations. This quest creates a platform for both the writer and swamiji to come out of their subterfuges and transform into new beings.

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