

Missives as Literary Artefacts: I K Sharma's Unique Work**Dr. Rama Rao Vadapalli V.B.**

Speech has gained the prestige of literature long ago with the addresses of icons like Abraham Lincoln of Gettysburg Address, Swami Vivekananda's speech in the Parliament of Religions and Jawaharlal Nehru's memorable oration Tryst with Destiny. Letter writing is also a genre of literature. As students we read Hazlitt's letter to his son and Johnson's letter to Lord Chesterfield. We also read Nehru's 'Letters from a Father to his Daughter' as a piece of great writing, as literature. Today when the art of letter writing is a dying practice, it is indeed praiseworthy to elevate letters to a literary genre which is worthy of many ramifications. I.K.Sharma's *A Treasure Island of Letters* belongs to the genre which persists as long as readers continue their practice. This treasure contains letters written by poets, academicians and intellectuals in high positions. The thrust however is on poetry, its practice and performance. Dr Sharma, an octogenarian forging ahead, is a poet of eminence and translator too of renown. He added another feather to his cap by coming up with this extraordinary and uncommon book on epistles and missives. These can be termed belles letters for letters have many connotations – love letters to missives, apart from billet-doux, jokingly, love letters.

The book is a collection of ninety three letters including eight in Hindi and thirteen from abroad received by the author in a period of about four decades from people of eminence and importance. They have relevance to matters literary. Many of them bring into relief the traits of litterateurs in modernity, true, real or dubious. Some of them are electrifying and intriguing with the writers' personalities and eminence. They write about, among other things, literature, literary criticism and literary appreciation mixed with their experiences, joyful and sometimes grim providing exemplary reading material. Most of the letters are from academics and those stationed in high positions. The author in his wisdom gives the freedom to the readers to draw their own conclusions about things past.

Letters written by men of letters reputed as literary critics laced with views and personal experiences, joyful and at times grim, offer exemplary reading material for enthusiastic readers. The letters are about English poetry written by our countrymen. Poets have distinctive personalities. Some of these are not expected by the writers to be read by all. This author has done great service providing good reading with the best of intentions. In a span of about four decades these letters are carefully preserved these missives. Being a reputed poet himself humane mental make up is his forte. The objective of the author is not exclusion but inclusion.

Poetry written in English by our countrymen has come to a stage where some poets are considered more equal than others. A kind of hegemony by some has been commented on by

many. Even some distinctive poets are not shown the respect they deserve. Poets like R.K.Singh and P.C.K. Prem, to cite only two, are cases in point.

The author's foreword is a clear *raison d'être*. "A letter is not a mere scrap of paper awash with words. It's a living entity wherein a heart throbs and a soul gives utterance to its long-held ideas and feelings. ... Letters from non-literary sources are no less valuable though occasionally tip towards adulation. ... Helpfully they (the letters) define a slice of their (the letter writers'), general attitude towards life and literature, and also their way of living." These are epistles, exchanges of views and sentiments, which would rightly come under belles-lettres. In a letter O. P. Mathur wrote "One's writings, especially letters, reflect one's personality and each one of your letters increased my desire to meet you in person. ..."

There are some intimately personal letters. They reveal the esteem in which this author is held by them. Here is the letter P.S. Sundaram had written to this author.

"... I didn't care much for Krishna Srinivas and his pretensions... He is now on a committee which is to assign work for selected people to undertake the translation of *Kambaramayanam*. As it happens I have with me ready for publication the entire *Balakandam* translated by me into English quatrains (5246 lines). Do you know Srinivas well enough to suggest that he might ask me whether I would care to be associated with the translations? ... Whatever I have said about Srinivas I cannot and will not unsay, even to gain a kingdom."(pp. 16-17)

Sometimes some letters contained very strong criticism, but, originally, they are not meant to be read by all. "And do you know Nemade has won a Sahitya Akademi Award for his book on criticism in Marathi. Of course if Devi can get an award for a first book of criticism while Iyengar, CDN have written so much. Many were not considered – Anything is possible! ... (p.30) There is another such letter from R.R. Menon making comments on M.K. Naik and Prof R.N. Sinha: "Such casual off-the desk production of aging academics who by their omissions and commissions do more harm than good should be told in the face that their work is not good enough. India is a big country and there are many poets. Admittedly some may be bad but to condemn them as a class as weeds is not justifiable." (p. 83.)

There are nice words of praise from many on Sharma's poetry. Wrote Iftikhar Husain Rizvi: "Your poetry distinguishes you from other poesy. 'Style is the man' is applicable to you most among the modern Indian English poets ..." (p.162) R.K. Singh wrote: "You are perhaps the only serious poet, who has humour so competently handled. Of course irony is your forte." In another letter: "... I would request you to do a strong critique of Naik and Narayanan as the perspective for a parallel evaluation of some of the ignored authors..." In another Singh wrote strongly championing the cause of 'non-Bombay poets'; "You will also appreciate that we have

survived despite the Bombay poets that seem to be the only Indian English poetry for certain people. Whether they like it or not, I will be around as active poet for another ten or even more. ... (p.174)

A very interesting aspect of this book is containing an essay 'A Bumper Crop' by Shiv K. Kumar published in The Hindustan Times Sunday Magazine of Oct. 16, 1988.

Some of that columnist's remarks about the participants in the poets' meet in Shimla under the aegis of the Himachal Pradesh Dept of Culture have sparked a controversy. One participant praised the meet as the 'nest of singing birds'. But here are some of Shiv K. Kumar's comments. He came down heavily on some poets. "But there are some whose reputation may never travel beyond Kalka. For instance the name that kept cropping up periodically was Som P. Ranchan, whose work was eulogized by at least two of the participants I.N. (sic read K) Sharma (Jaipur) and O.P. Bhatnagar (Amravati)." (p.218) The esteemed columnist's (for clarity the professor who wrote the article is called so here) sentences are vociferous and vitriolic. The two poets mentioned above were called poetasters and pseudo-critics. I quote: "These two participants (*poetasters and pseudo-critics*) made their presence through their indiscriminate boasting of the 'native genius'. The former even tried to demolish 'the old generation' especially its principal representative, Nissim Ezekiel, to flaunt his own discovery of 'the new voices'; who were, of course, new but without any distinct identity." (p.219) And then there is this averment: 'So the really new voices I encountered at this festival were not the ones whipped into prominence by our academic critics, mostly mercenaries, who'd wax eloquent over anyone, anywhere so long as they are assured of local hospitality, of a sort of brief "roti-kapda-makan", a two day trip away from Jaipur or Amravati. ... Verse, today, is freewheeling and experimental, irreverent in tone and strikingly visual in imagery... As the poets read their poems, each in his/her distinctive voice, at the Bachat Auditorium, three levels below the Mall, out in the open courtyard, I noticed every day, lots of monkeys, our little Hanumans, their stares fixed on the visitors from other parts of the country....' (Ibid)

We are reminded of Samuel Johnson's crisp saying: 'Argument is pretty well at an end when it comes to calling names!'

The author Sharma placed on record the letters written to him by poet-friends and academics, Anil Wilson, Dr. Kailash Ahluwalia, I.S. Sharma and D.C. Chambial besides his own letter in this regard.

Wrote Anil Wilson: 'One reading between the lines I can see that Shiv K. Kumar's scurrilous piece is an attempt to defend his over-rated poetic position against poetry which is far above his limited metier... Finally, Kumar's pretentious pose in becoming the defender of Ezekiel, Rakshat Puri, Keshav Malik and others, is very sickening. ... Perhaps Kumar would do well to realize the

ridiculous figure he cuts in trying to become Don Quixote and tilting against wind mills....'(p.223)

Ahluwalia wrote: 'The write up smacks of parochialism, groupism and jealousy.'(p.224) I.S. Sharma wrote: 'Dr Shiv K. Kumar is talking through his hat. He has not read Ranchan who wrote 12 books of poetry... It does not behove Shiv K.Kumar who has not read him (Ranchan) to give judgements.'" (p.225)

The author of this book under review , I.K.Sharma, wrote: "...I must inform your columnist that the 'Roti-Kapda-Makaan' poets of our country are more sincere, more genuine, and hence authentic than the 'butter-bush shirt- bungalow' prowlers' of academic hues. Their emotions are 'significant' in comparison to the borrowed ideas of these old pseudo-westerners." (p.227)

R.K. Singh wrote: 'I am shocked to read his (Kumar's) narrow attitude in the column...By trying to throttle the new voices ... the learned columnist has only expressed his ignorance of hundreds of new poets...'

D.C.Chambial wrote to Sharma 'He (Kumar) doesn't seem to have recovered from the shock he had received at Bachat Bhavan'(p.229) What is more, he has written a long letter to the editor of H.T. who must have thought it wise not to carry it, perhaps in the best interest of his paper. Chambial wrote: 'It has betrayed Prof. Kumar's inclination to floccinaucinihilipilification.'(p.231)

For lack of reasonable space I can only cite the last short paragraph of Chambial's letter Sharma has carried in his book. : 'I think the younger generation of Indian English literature, writing, at present, needs guidance from the elder writers and not their harsh disparaging judgement.'(p.231)

The most important aspect of this book is presentation of the letter writers' views on current Indian English poetry. Som P. Ranchan who passed a few months ago wrote: 'The official canonization of a few poets must stop.'(p.129) Asha Biswas wrote: 'The pity was, no one said anything when she (Eunice de Souza) wrote *Nine Indian Women Poets' Confessional Poetry*. The problem is – these minority poets from Bombay starting from Ezekiel have kicked their predecessors into the corner ... unfortunately many of us from the Hindi belt too are following them perhaps in the hope that they might be noticed by this minority mafia.'(p.168)

The letters in this book have immense historical interest of the mindsets of poets, practitioners and budding ones of yester years, theoreticians and so a must read for all.

Work Cited

Sharma I.K. *A Treasure Island of Letters*, Deepak Publications, Jaipur, 2015, PB,
Pages 240 Price Rs 325/- (Page numbers of quotes in brackets refer to this.)