

CRITICAL ESSAY

A Viewpoint on Poets and Poetry in a Difficult Time

P C K Prem

A poet acts, reacts and interacts at different times with various kinds of people and gathers multiple experiences and challenges, and tries to give them suitable chronological order but stays obscure. He is caught up in an inquisitive analysis of the realities as frenzied current life makes it difficult to find rationality many a time and so an inquiring mind ponders over seriously. One cannot forget the past even if one tries, for it is from ancient times, one gets some glimpses of roots and origin that make one think the deep and long, which is a good beginning for some imaginative outpouring with love and compassion. In a way, one pursues legacy and lives with it, otherwise, it drives one to scepticism and disorientation where purification causes a big threat.

A stage in life comes when one attempts to know the secret of life and existence amidst the ghost of death that works under the diktat of Time spirit as one feels at the burial grounds when he watches burning bodies...! It is also a moment of introspection and painful inspiration when one encounters the inevitability of death and if he sings its glory lyrically, it speaks of strength.

Poets ought to know the puzzling dilemma of modern times and accept the challenge of terrifying possibilities where cerebral exercise turns ineffectual, snobby and dicey that love to create its own area of elimination with ill-fated outcomes. To look back is good for here one understands situations and people and as positivity fills, one enjoys living in the mystery of birth and death, a cycle man struggles hard to know.

I have already observed that the articles are the outcome of experiences and encounters of varied kinds I had in life with different people and challenging situations and my own analysis of knowledge,

experiences and impressions as a 'creator and critic' of poetry and diverse genres of texts and artistic frames.

1. The current age keeps a creative artist under tension

Many a time, a poet, or a creative artist, experiences incredible stress of age. However, it stirs imagination and strength of mind to see realities, which make life difficult and at the same time, throw challenges. Encounters with persons with a wide range of experience and knowledge, build up feelings of resolve to read the human mind and heart. Even a chance meeting creates a plethora of impressions with crowds of feelings and thoughts. I fail to offer logic in a normal sequential course of fallout but it often happens with a sensitive intellect, who wishes to participate in the affairs of the world.

An intellectual inquiry into the actualities of life reveals a deadly conundrum where a man tries to put aside emotional areas so that he puts up a gutsy face and understands judicious existence and identity in complex times. Questions of survival at the worldly level and happening beyond arise but do not find apt answers. Who, why and how of life appear to disturb but he ignores them. An assortment of thoughts and feelings gather an ordinary man realizes but avoids in-depth scrutiny and so his outlook regarding life never gains intensity or depth of understanding. Wherever, the crisis of feelings, and the perplexity of ideas and thoughts about man and the world exist in inquiring intellect, it is a cautious journey into the regions of man's natural ability to react and speak about what he feels and if it continues, he begins to reflect seriously.

To seek possible help, he goes back to see what he gets from his heritage, the wealth of experience and wisdom of his ancestors, the ancients. It happens with an ordinary man engaged in routine acts of making survival easy and if he reflects on life a little more, he thinks of wealth he cares little about but owns as a right. Ancestral wealth is something on which he survives from day one and ironically, he is rarely beholden to ancestors.

Intellect and heart work and try unconsciously to find the rationale of the background in which man lives in totality where men, matter, nature, experiences, impressions, little jealousies and bitterness, postulations, future and destiny pull together such various fragments and segments of life and experiences, and thereafter, in solitary moments, a few perceptive brains begin to analyze.

2. Going back to the past and recollecting little memories at different stages of life has authentic significance

From here, a man goes to the past, I think now. Earlier, perhaps I hardly thought seriously, for that was not the age, I console. However, now I think of scattered books and some scrawls on loose papers including notebooks, which teachers told or taught to take notice of, for these keep knowledge integral to some extent even if one is unconcerned about what the ancient or modern critical theories propound.

On inquiry, one finds every vigilant and astute intellect is a critic and an artist as well. It was and is a mass of treasures of wisdom and knowledge in the literature that parents, grandparents, their parents and so on...had kept secure for the future.

It was a dead wealth –land, house, books and...memories left around but never visible even as I thought they lived somewhere inside and inspired to continue the journey. It is not new but it provokes me to think. After all, a man wishes to live when he fully knows that nothing survives. Why it is? This thought process stirs a few and a man feels there is something eternal, lasting and indestructible that the dead left for the future and there, he thinks of the huge wealth they left turns into motivation and inspiration for the generation living now and those who will live in future.

If the old offer adequate stuff to think over what is futile, a mere waste or short-lived, then explicitly, it is possible to presume. If one understands it as an exactly eternal flow of thoughts and feelings, it appears a contradictory thought also but it is not a faulty route of valuation during deliberations. It is something timeless and ageless. A spring from where one gets inspiration and so life moves on and on, therefore at this stage, questions of birth and death arise. Even while you ponder over the futility of wisdom that fails to know what is beyond, it is from here that creative artists, saints, religious men and intellectuals begin the arduous and endless task of never-ending inquiry into the mystery of life.

As a man grows up he leans back on what his ancestors left, and thought, draws inspiration and continues to live life while the artist also wakes up to say what he wants in a more stylistic, distinguished and classy manner of expression. If he, you or I write, it is the expression of what they bequeathed. Therefore, I simply think I am continuing the tradition good or bad and so you, everyone else and I will hand over the legacy to the future. A creative artist continues to revive what he gives with a faint

freshness and usually speaks of something innovative, which is not always true and at times, it is blatant discomfiture.

3. The frame of mind when a poet wants to know the enigma of life and existence

It was a different frame of mind when I wrote verses that investigated deep into the mystery of life, existence and its objective on earth. The questions were not new but ancient. Perhaps everyone was worried about, since the times of primaeval man, who possibly had initially, no knowledge of the source of inner pain or physical wounds and if he had it was inexplicable and from that age, he travelled a long distance in time and space.

Questions troubled me as I wrote, and death or the dead often caused genuine anxieties. I understood the meaning as everybody knows its philosophic and ordinary meaning but really fails to explain. The mysterious theme often occupies the man when in thoughtful moments and so ideas of life and death crawl and generate bruises in regions of emotions and thoughts. However, birth is not of consequence. Death is. I did not wish to die. Does anyone want? I just think of the past and speak the truth perhaps, for there is hardly any substitute.

Near middle age in many instances, a man realizes that death is the only foreseeable truth. One purposely avoids discomfiting thoughts I feel. On the death of someone in the village, I vividly recall, I visited the cremation ground and carried wood, some dry, and a bundle of green twigs instantly fell. The dead were consigned to flames and then, the collection of ashes, going to Hardwar and those unpleasant rather awful rituals and unwilling acts of charity and gifts to pandas of hungry eyes. However, that was their livelihood so...why incur displeasure. I know the dead lives inside everyone and a man, at times, realizes that the dead are still alive. The existence of the dead inspires us to live and live. What a charade! At melancholic moments, it teases and pricks and then, one feels to write a requiem –a soft funeral song. The experience of this hymn or whispering is also an inspiring moment for a creative artist.

Mind it, the uncertainty of death and faces of the dead act as the basis of fears and thrills, and you think...and so, I write. It is this thought that gives birth to Half Men –the incomplete men. It is an allegorical figure one creates when perfection appears impossible. It is not a question of any critical knack or theory. It is a fact and basis of what you write at times. A creative artist cannot exist in isolation

and art does not take birth in a void. No doubt, nature is always dear to many men whether susceptible or insensate. It is good to escape from the teasing thoughts of worldly worries but then how long. A creative writer must talk with whatever medium he chooses –prose, poetry or intervallic unfolding or story or simple text of a few lines, plain and yet thoughtful therefore, if he talks lyrically, it is an art and so he is proud of it.

4. Ignorance as a blessing and how intellectual power turns exclusive

Knowledge as ignorance is bliss, a challenge and a dangerous weapon also that kills I realize. It is a time of crisis in perilous and complex times and an opportunity to seize and act wisely. Intellectuality is vile, wicked and ostentatious if it indulges in the pastime of purging, a kind of exclusion and therefore, the consequences could be unfortunate.

It is the message of contemporary times I could make out when I go through again lyrics of many poets and shuffle pages of poetry books at leisure and think of age and obscurity. One is hesitant to accept if poetry provides pleasure in hard times. Lyrical delight is transient, is the truth but to assure ‘the self’ it is good to repeat poetic lines frequently as it underlines the warmth of heart and intellect. Like any other considerate and nervous man, I may appear livid and hurt but I am interested to discard and destroy the debris of iniquity and indiscretion that make life wretched and forlorn. To what extent I am a winner, is the question, for care and compassion are necessary in life during wicked times.

It is an effort to align with everyone as thoughts of sharing grief and agony of times with the other in an analogous situation, offer relief with whatever hope and happiness in store, a man keeps. I hold I am always a protagonist of a life of joy and a staunch believer in continuing the fight against evil forces that try to injure the social body. There is nothing new in what I say and I guess it is with others to whom I am talking to...a very selfish thought I nurse but I cannot stay away from the callous and sadistic manifestation

Maybe, one reads people and times with exclusive personal viewpoints, for one notices conflicts and variations in the conduct of men around, who speak of the life of hope in plenty. One may say he wants to convey the meaning of trust and expectancy even while a man might not change habits. However, when habits become mere rituals, it is a sign of lethal languor and boredom. It often happens

with some anonymous belief and therefore, variation is possible, and no doubt, finality suffers. In the same way, meanings presuppose a different profile.

A creative artist is very active at times, thinks of life from various perspectives, and then abruptly, is silent. It does not mean that passivity or lassitude takes over afterwards, or it is a kind of dreariness or lack of interest in man and humanity. Ego and self-centeredness, one feels, overwhelm a man I know. It is a great flaw but one cannot hide it. One goes back and realizes that understanding the minds of people and the conditions of life in which they live all over the world have an affirmative aura of mystery, and requires a man to inquire deep into and comprehend the cycle and rotation of enigmatic life.

5. **At times, for a man principles scarcely matter and this truth is harsh but strangely enough it also functions as inspiration**

The truth is one speaks about others at times distrustfully and there a cruel thought determines and one appears honest and genuine when one is selfish, and one cannot deny this state of mind. Mind it a man does not consider principles to matter in life and the thought provokes. Is it what one wonders?

This difficulty is deadly and in the art of poetry, it is an inspiration. A strange suggestion I consider. It may be restricted to me only! Truth is bitter, all say and one should accept. Even godly men tell lies...and if one resists the temptation to tell lies, it is great. A creative artist ought to know. It is disastrous I think when alone. However, a lover of art ought to learn to live with required and redundant possibilities. It is not always true. Amidst truth, reality, mendacity, and trumped-up episodic inspiration for a work of art live and thrive.

If it is peace, violence also makes life miserable. If a man speaks of growth, he also owns up to imperfections in attitude with an overshadowing sense of sadism and cynicism. It is all in poetry...a work of art, a slice of literature.

It is a time of conciliation and conflict, running parallel to attain the goal of an ideal life amidst fears of ambiguities and prejudices a man scarcely appears to confess. How to define and give definition to this psychological state is a thorny question for an artist of words and so through verses, a poet tries to construe what he understands. Even if a creative writer is a critic, at the time of the creation of a

poem or story or novel or any piece of art, he is unconscious of the critic present inside. The absence of a critic in a creative mind is good for any piece of literature.

As a critic, at times, gives immense joy and pain enjoyment during the period one is tempted to share experiences obliquely. I was witness to tremendous social, economic and political changes, and recognized paroxysms of intellectual curiosity and a sense of inquisitiveness sans reaching potential finale in judging the outcome because of incongruities and absurdities men of the age carried notwithstanding plenty of radiance and light.

I wondered and asked about ‘the self’ of its scope and dimensions. Is it an individual hangover to look philosophic I am bewildered and prompted to ask ingenious intellects. Is it possible to measure ‘the self’? Not so easy but efforts to reach somewhere or nowhere, invariably exist, and from here, an inquiry may begin, which one can share only through an oblique literary endeavour or when he scribbles a few poetic lines at random.

6. Poetic incubation with deep reflection spurs an ingenious process which is not a very convenient period in any art, particularly poetry

I am still to find out. However, the period of incubation and intense deliberation, while one goes through the process of creative work, is wearing and harrowing. A man is alone and morose and seems to rotate single-footed and only heaves deep sad sighs while he stretches his arms as if in a yogic posture to get relief but suffocation continues to enhance inner sufferings as he fails to understand what takes place outside and thus, passing through frustration, he visualizes strange and mysterious scenarios.

Experience of terrifying magnitude haunts during the period but an artist out to meet the creation so that before he finishes, he hits upon a logical fulcrum, again a futile attempt, as a poet, I realized.

Therefore, to find an opportunity for steadiness and firmness in meanings that change each moment recedes further and this situation makes a creative artist alive and fits in spite of the uniformity in which he lives.

Aberrations no doubt he stumbles upon but a blueprint is discernible to an astute poetry lover in a particular verse when he looks into the word construction and its lyrical storyline or the text as

rituals, which indirectly, give pleasure to the ears rightly or wrongly. It seems like a puzzle many a time.

Creation of artwork is a serious act and to walk on a poetic track is a unique experience. One tries to weave a story of a modern man within a story, and it does happen during the composition of long poems. It is the unconscious formation of a long verse in the corners of the heart and mind, and a poet doubts if it was also premeditated and conscious. In short, in verses of a few lines, one is comfortable. However, long verses need concentration on thought, emotions and the statement an artist wishes to make to avoid trap falls. At times, contradictions work toward pacification and fusion. In this mental state, construction is powerful, effective and genuine.

In each reflective and investigational quest, a creative mind visualizes a real man many times. Even when he is in a crowd or in a large hall, a predisposed mind hears many voices and giggles, whispers and ardent boos and sighs.

At another moment, the hurling of abuses, mikes and chairs, caps and papers with purpose perhaps create a scary and uncanny scenario, a modern propensity. Voices and words carry images of numerous walking silhouettes laughing and sardonic and thus, appear to provoke a creative mind, a poet, who is distraught at the contemporary socio-political scenario and therefore, he caricatures such anecdotes with irony and a little anguish and anger. No imaginative power can determine the depth and length of a verse. At times, a few lines predict the philosophic contour of a lifetime

A poet writes lyrics and it hardly matters whether it is long or short. It depends on a thought he develops and yes, it looks odd and frightening but the truth is he takes up a theme even if it appears hazy and begins to grow with it until prospective clarity comes to the lines as he tunes up words. Again, intensity works hard to interweave the rational body of a man into motion. It creates a man but it is not a full man. It is half, for it is incomplete and imperfect and so an artist fails.

Even god (if one accepts such an existence), who created man, was perhaps non-serious because on analysis it is difficult, for an inquiring intellect is prone to say that man –particularly a modern man, is an image of god. If he is, it is a huge travesty. However, a creative mind tries to sympathize with the man despite infirmities of body and intellect, who is a picture of wretchedness in the reality of splendour and magnificence, as anguish and desolation overwhelm.

Now, what is this man? It baffles. One feels it inside and it is inside of everyone. A great puzzle is to locate its positioning though it registers its presence every moment whether pleasant or agonizing and this begins the distillation of emotions and thoughts and here, the artist wishes to arrest it in appropriate lyrical lexis.

A man, as a creator tries to identify it with a purpose even if indefinite. A creation, to the architect -the creator of a piece of art looks larger than life and at that stage, it challenges the creator. It is a dilemma.

In a man, an incomplete man or say half man notwithstanding, flaws are not only shadows but also it seems, these enter the minds and hearts of people around and it makes one aware of the contamination. Creation is a cumulative outcome of what the creator's intellectual energy does.

Doubts arise at times and one feels convinced that the creator fails. Not the creation it is, and this unforeseen realization disturbs me.

7. Truth and goodness, ambitions and iniquity constitute man and society and these are parts of poetry that offer artistic joy

Man, an incomplete man or say half man is a bomb, a crust of love, compassion, empathy, hate and annihilation, and an embodiment of three basic qualities of *Sattva* (Truth, integrity etc.), *Rajas* (Passion, ambition, power etc.) and *Tamas* (Negative feelings, thoughts, wickedness etc) also. Many a time, a creative mind thinks but fails to locate its true status, for he is an image of a god or a bundle of flesh and bones. Still, he lives not only within but also breathes outside of each one and therefore, speculations linger on without reprieve.

A creative mind begins to realize that it is bad rather than deadly. However, he withdraws for it is an implausible thought emerging out of fear psychosis or perspective or one may call it neurosis. Qualms and uncertainties put stress on the inner man the second voice of a man of flesh and bones. He is listening whether alone or in a crowd and so, it becomes a burden. Perhaps, he ignores it as in incurable consternation he thinks and trusts even while he lives in scepticism, the pitiable man –a fractured structure that moves, sitting inside everyone. That gives some stimulating driving force to a poetic frenzy but it speaks of truth irrefutable.

Maybe, a man (?) feels, history is alive, and culture breathes as the old pulsate. A man may look unhappy when he finds people walking with gruff faces, where heads look like patches of darkness, for it is dormant yearning of man to perpetuate the tyranny of lies, to live a life of men, not precisely men and therefore, many questions crop up. Here, one fumbles and falls but cannot correct deformities, for creation at times, turns out massive burden realities of life create, and none can find a getaway. Consequent nestling within is a luxuriant soil for lyrical passion.

Without knowing, we continue to find a solid basis where life can hold a torch of eternal love, peace and harmony. Perhaps a man (an incomplete man?) a creation of god will keep the flame of eternal love and compassion burning. It is the wish of god. Does God exist? Doubts with flickers of faith, stir a lyrical heart and mind.

Going beyond the traditional constraints, many a time brings not only cynicism but also confusion. Man pursues the path of the time-honoured ethical organism he creates. It can be a technique or could be straightforward and multipart.

Man moves about from the classy flavour and experience of the old and the ancient to the current times in a vastly changed attitude where he confronts internal and external anarchy and chaos without possibly letting off. In spite of the argument to the contrary, he evinces love for the old and dead secretly and that causes an inconvenient situation as he finds poetic expression a bit effortless and still a challenge.

It is the predicament of the author, a poet, who carries historic judiciousness within and later, links it to current times through poetic outpouring or write-ups.

Perhaps, a creative artist, or a poet... wants rationalization for what he writes or wishes to know the correctness of what he states. In such an eventuality, it is reticence and lack of certainty that force us to find a foothold and solid stand even in the shaky appendix of identity.

A writer understands the utility of living in a group and away from it, and still, he wants autonomy, wishes to preserve detachment from the crowd, and so looks out for intellectual resolution without annoying anyone.

A man in good faith reasons out an existence and the idea of righteousness and thoughts of interests of people he often meets. Therefore, he treads the path of truth and here, he confronts

traditional but suppressed resistance from ‘the self’. This quiet activity persuades him to invent ‘another self’ and if the inclination spreads, it gives birth to men of a singular nature.

The distinction is subtle but it has a sense of mesmerizing exploration when a man lives as a half man or incomplete man and so the creation of split or half men is the consequence of flawed thought and concept but underlines the existence of imperfect man, probably a full man. One knows that the poet’s imagination is free from shackles, and the thought may be strange and eccentric, but imagination has its reasons.

Living men as incomplete men raise questions of identity at that time. Retrieval of delusion and illusion for a poet is interesting and exciting but not very gratifying. A man in search of completeness and wholeness it appears, lives in dreams, phoney notions of magnitude even as he creates a new world with heavens and gods for the convenience of ‘the self’, for he becomes a central character and preceptor.

It looks strange. It is a land where imperfect men jump from the earth to the sky and create the heavens for pleasure and it is an excursion without hanging over morality or principles, and so the real men are lost.

In modern times, a thought besieges that men, who talk and walk, suffer not from ‘the identity crisis but from the loss of it’ because individual zones of illusions overwhelm and defeat the principle of birth and eventually vanish into oblivion.

Not the perception or the exposition of impasse it is as men in search of complete distinctive entities take control of the mental landscape but it is the intricacy of sustaining it for a long ...because perceived deformation drives to the ultimate end.

Was it a creation out of mind’s eye and vision for the pleasure and joy of creating men partially without ever envisaging disastrous formations, which only perpetuated sin and impiety but continued to live? Or was it a poetic creation to disturb ‘the self’ and find comforting asylum elsewhere, for it also offers lyrical joy when one thinks of the location of atypical creation in another man –not complete as yet but a bit mystifying proposition.

Questions arise, puzzle and confound but inquiry continue as one grows in a civilized world as a fractured man in the image of a full man...for it is an exploration of ‘the self’ through ‘the self’, and

that is a challenge for a man to situate identity somewhere without noise. Does poetry help in arriving at a conceivable solution to these manifold quests, questions stay alive?

About the Author

P C K Prem (P C Katoch of Garh-Malkher, Palampur, Himachal, a Former Academician, Civil Servant and Member of Himachal Public Service Commission, Shimla) an author of several books is a poet, novelist, short story writer, trans-creator and a critic in English and Hindi from Himachal, India. He has published eleven volumes of poetry along with Collected Poems besides six books on criticism, four books on ancient literature, two on folk tales, six novels and four collections of short fiction. In Hindi, he has authored twenty novels, nine books on short fiction and a collection of poems besides more than a hundred critical articles, reviews and critiques published in various national and international journals and anthologies.

Echoing Time and Civilizations (Editors –Rob Harle, Sunil Sharma and Sangeeta Sharma) 2015 and *The Spirit of Age and Ideas (in the Novels of P C K Prem (Editor –Dr Laxmi Prasad)* in 2016 and *Kathasagar of P C K Prem* (Dr Jogindra) are books on him. His recent publications are *History of Contemporary Indian English Poetry – an Appraisal* (2019) in two volumes, *The Lord of Gods* (2019) in two volumes, based on *Srimadbhagavata Mahapurana* and the latest *As I Know ‘The Lord of the Mountains’ Shiva Purana* (2021).

He lives in Palampur, Himachal, India.