

## **Socio- Religious Resentment in Shiv K. Kumar**

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### **Abstract**

*Shiv K. Kumar is one of the most distinguished poets of India writing in English today. As a poet, he deals with personal suffering, loss, hope, agony, the contemporary reality, love, and sex. The matter and the manner of his poems are always simple as he takes every natural object for his poetic creation. A kind of liveliness in expression is found in his poems. The themes and contents of his poems present a deep feel for the people who suffer while living and die unnoticed. This paper attempts to highlight Kumar's resentment over the Socio-religious fabric of Indian society, and his anguish towards the practices that are blind and irrational.*

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Shiv K. Kumar, a distinguished academic-turned creative artist, is a multi-faceted personality who writes prolifically to carve out a niche for himself in the realms of Indian writing in English. His creative genius produced a number of poems, novels and plays. He is also a known critic and translator. He was recognized for his immense contribution to Indian English Literature with a Sahitya Academy Award (for his collection *Trapfalls in the Sky*) in 1986. He has produced thirteen volumes of poetry which includes *Articu-late Silences* (1970), *Cobwebs in the Sun* (1974), *Subterfuges*, (1975), *The Last Wedding Anniversary*(1975), *Woolgathering*(1995), *Thus Spake Buddha* (2001), *Losing My Ways*(2008), and *Where Have the Dead Gone?*(2009).

The observation of the Indian Review of Books that ‘the poems [of Kumar] are evocative and traverse a highly emotional path looking for some radical meaning in the dreariness of modern life’ makes it clear that his poem have a tone for the people lacking liveliness in society. Kumar has dealt with all the aspects of modern life in a unique way so as to make his reader fully comprehend and appreciate what he wishes to convey. His poetic corpus has been estimated from many perspectives. This paper aims to study the poet’s resentment over the Socio-religious construction of Indian society. Poetry, for the Romantics, is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings but for Kumar it proves to be a powerful tool for a conscious overflow of resentment at the social system, at the irrational activities of people, and the blind rituals. Also, Kumar is all at pains to see the degrading effects on Nature by the thoughtless behavior of the masses. Love for nature is different from care for nature. Spencer’s Thames is love while T S Eliot’s is care. In the same way Kumar has exhibited his care for nature in his reactions to the environmental degradation caused to the natural objects by human beings.

Kumar belongs to a Hindu Arora family but he never agrees to follow the beliefs that are blind. Bruce King, aptly remarks ‘it is tempting to see Kumar as someone very much within Hindu society rebelling to get out while still retaining emotional and personal ties to it’. His concern for environment is clearly seen in a poem “Cleansing Ganga”. A Hindu has to respect the River Ganges and should keep it pure and clean. The River Ganges, in its origin from the hills, is pure as a new-born child, as the chicken come out of the shell-prison, or like the calf that runs towards the udders of its mother-cow. The river Ganges (as presented in the poem ‘Cleansing Ganga) is pure and serene at the time of her birth. But she has to take a long course before taking shelter into the sea. Unfortunately, she gets polluted with a lot of garbage and factory wastage. The bones and ashes of the dead are also thrown into her pure flow. Often crocodiles open their ‘yawning jaws ‘to swallow other creatures. The poet laments over the impure condition of the Ganges:

It's only when they are carried down the river of time  
That iron sinks into their souls.  
The waters then get sullied by ritual and dogma—  
ashes and bones,  
wilted floral offerings to the dead,  
and the noontime sweat oozing from the saffron  
stripped foreheads of the crocodiles  
Whose yawning jaws chant mantras in some obsolete  
tongue. (8-15)

One of the main causes of water as well as river pollution is the rituals done on the banks of the rivers. The fault is not with the religious rituals but with the people who perform the rites. Shiv K. Kumar satirizes the blind rituals performed on the banks of the river. The superstitious people while performing the many rites and rituals to get themselves purified from all their sins pollute and leave the rivers with dirt and impurity. The gagged and polluted rivers, in spite of the severe harms done to it remains as the most important source of water for cultivation on the land adjacent to its shore. And yet the mindless process of 'immersion' goes on:

May be if someone could dismantle all scaffoldings  
Along the mother river's waistline  
And ask the dead to seek immersion  
In other confluences,  
The little fish will then bleach these waters  
For the sun's lasers to probe her limpid groin. (16-21)

In a poem "Crematorium at Adikmet Hyderabad," Kumar reveals his own experience at the ritual carried out in a crematorium where he drives his reader to the world of mortality. He informs that there are no leavings of livings after their death:

Perched on the wall a vulture cogitates  
upon human avidity— Flesh offered  
to the flames bones and ashes  
to the Ganges. No leavings  
for the living. (3-7)

The impermanence of man is apparently elaborated in these lines. But the disagreement for the unnecessary rituals is in the last lines of the poems. Kumar refuses to be swayed away by mere rituals and instead sees the horror and reality within. He records these incidents with a subtle touch of irony and skilful art of sarcasm in the following manner:

And now my father's head  
Awaits my hand  
The world crackles into a bonfire  
The Priest Chant louder  
For a generous dip(15-19)

Like the "Crematorium at Adikmet, Hyderabad," there is also another important poem called "At the Ghats on Banaras." It is a poem designed to bring out the same idea, and presented a follow up for the rituals blindly carried out in the Ghats of Banaras. Kumar exhorts his reader to see and understand his disinterest and resentment at the funeral rites for the dead. His poem "At the Ghats of Banaras" clearly captures, with a tinge of irony, the rituals are performed at the Ghats Banaras:

A Priest's chant  
Tender but preemptory  
Churns the viscid waters  
Into submission. (7-10)

The superstitious hazards are many in our society which the poet laments over in his poems. There are many more maladies causing greater harms to the serene lives of people. Parity and equality is another rarity in our society. In the poem "Tis Hazari Court, Delhi," a derisive attack is launched by Kumar. He playfully mocks, with a subtle undertone of humour, at the delayed redress of petitions:

On the rickety wooden benches,  
The waiting pilgrims have left  
Their bones for their progeny to collect (12-14)

Kumar is resentful about the judicial system of India which he mocks in the lines:

I am now old and snuffed out, my son  
I am lost somewhere in these catacombs  
so enter ye from the eastern gate-  
and I already see your son and his-  
and his – all queued up brandishing the same petition  
For a speedy readdress (30-36)

This satirist vein is continued in his another poem "Farwell to Tis Hazari Courts, Delhi". Here, he gives vent of his opposition to judiciary system of India, and the waiting of petitioner for resolution. He explains how a petitioner's dreams too filled with proceedings of this court' in the lines:

In my dreams, I sometimes return  
To your arena, putrescent with bones

Of your countless victims (11-13)

Kumar concludes this poem with an idea that the petitioner is ready to bring his grandson for the compliant he filed. This sarcastic expression on the courts is a finest aspect to find in the poems of Kumar. The lines below give the reader a clear idea of how the court victimizes the petitioner instead to resolve:

I may someday bring my grandson here  
To let him see your catacombs  
So that he may never walk past your front gate  
On which glower the words:  
Enter ye only to be buried alive. (23-28)

Kumar looks upon the livelihood of these people with a caring attitude, and he brings his reader to feel the exact intensity which he experienced. The deprival of contented social life is yet another theme frequently dealt with, and continues to dominate the very fabric of many of his poems. In fact, modern Indian poets writing in English endeavor incessantly to write on themes related to social reality. With Shiv K Kumar, it becomes an obsession, and the clarity and subtlety with which he carves out his images is his proud possession. The images employed in his poems are adequate and very apt that the very images become the very idea of the poems. Poverty is one painful reality hurting the so called rich culture of our country. Kumar's description of pavement sleepers is indeed the tip of an iceberg:

Lying cheek by jowl, under cover of night-sky  
heads on jute-bags rolled into pillows,  
legs dangling on the curb,  
they look like corpses waiting to be dumped  
into a mass grave.(1-5)

Kumar seems to have reserved a caring space for the suffering humanity in his heart. He brings to light a shocking contrast between the suffering poor and the arrogant rich in a poem called, "Pavement Sleepers of Bombay". Pavement Sleepers may be poor but they have peace of mind which is beyond the reach of a rich woman in her maroon Mercedes. The images are very poignant and perfect and with which Kumar vividly brings out the sharp contrast between the two polarities of a glorious society:

That woman, in her maroon Mercedes,  
Drunk on speed, doesn't know  
That the road she has taken leads nowhere  
That peace resides on these pavements. (10-13)  
The sympathetic attitude of the poet towards the suffering sections of our

society makes a reader of Kumar to see him as a poet of ordinary man. Poets of the post-independence era, especially Parthasarathy, Mahapatra and Ezekiel, rendered a poetic touch and converted even the most ordinary objects and into sublime subject matters for their extraordinary poems. Like these poets, Kumar too voiced his concerns for the suffering community in his poem. Poems dealing with the refugees, pavement sleepers and the laborers bring forth his voice for them. Especially, Kumar is more sensitive and sympathetic while presenting the aching homeless life of the refugees. In a poem “Refugee” Kumar noticed a miserable condition of the refugees in the lines:

Blinkered like yoked bulls  
Burdened with ancestral memories,  
They trudge on, counting the milestones  
Which look like maimed tombstones  
While the time’s womb holds out  
Only a still-born (5-10)

The refugees suffer because their homeless. Though having homes of their own, the Indian women are not quite at home. They suffer as their lives are completely controlled by the males of their home. In a sense, they are also homeless and refugees in their own homes. Kumar feels for the pathetic plight of Indian women in his poem titled “Indian Women.” The picture of Indian women gathering at the village wells and waiting with their empty pitcher to fetch water reveals Kumar’s sympathetic view of the women folk of his county:

... for the moisture in their eyes,  
With zodiac doodling on the sands  
They guard their tattooed thighs  
Waiting for their men’s return  
Till even the shadows  
Roll up their contours  
And are gone  
Beyond the hills. (10-17)

There is yet another poem titled “A Woman Labourer Breast-Feeding Her Child” where Kumar describes, with some affection, the caring affection that a mother normally has for her baby. The poor mother works the whole day from morning to evening. She works hard in a construction site in the scorching sun, mixing cement with her sweat. Quite often she feels angry with the dull routine of carrying things from one place to another. Yet she does not forget to breast-feed her child as she is conscious all the time of the mother in her. She covers her open

breast with her head-veil and listens to the heart-beat of her child. Breast-feedings removes the difference between the rich and the poor as it is a universal feature. Poor or rich, mother is mother.

Under her head-veil, now dropped  
To cover two moons, wee hands  
And feet flutter like a culver.  
Time that never ceases to nibble  
At stone, wood or glass  
Now pricks up its ears to listen  
To a heart-throb. (10-16)

The society is engulfed with multitudinous confrontations. The socio-religious, socio-cultural, and socio-political confrontations have dexterously been delineated in the poems of Shiv K Kumar. Invariably, the poet has attempted to unravel the irrational social construct with his inquisitive explorations. The poems analyzed in this paper clearly present Kumar as a poet with a purpose – the purpose of bringing to light the plight of the suffering multitudes on account of the societal and religious imbalances in our society.

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