

A Transcendental and Eco-critical Reading of Sunil Sharma's Political Novel *The Minotaur*

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ABSTRACT

Sunil Sharma is in the vanguard of the contemporary fiction written in Indian English today. He has an enormous output of short fiction and poetry as well. Basically, a Marxist-text, but multi-layered, scholars are finding his novel highly relevant to assess the power -and wealth-driven modern societies. His debut novel, *The Minotaur*, is a master narrative that depicts the struggling humankind, groping for intellectual answers to old existential problems of the inequity of wealth and power, justice and good governance, and, oppression of the liberals. In short, the enduring human desires for a more humane, better, fair and liveable world for everybody. The novel is divided into an epilogue, eight chapters and an afterword. The most astonishing fact is the vision of the writer towards nature and its treatment at his hands. He has found nature to be a source of profound meaning, tranquillity and knowledge. Today, when there is a revived interest and lot of discussion over the reclamation of nature from mindless exploitation by man, it can be discerned that the writer in the very first decade of the twentieth century has posited wilderness with serenity, beauty, mysticism and spirituality. Nature has been delineated as life-giving and as a timeless marvel. The current paper deals with the transcendental and eco critical reading of this seminal text. It is an attempt to analyse and trace the writer's oblique but remarkable portrayal of the virtues manifested in nature.

Keywords: *Nature, jungle, wilderness, transcendentalism, spiritual.*

Sunil Sharma in *The Minotaur* gives a chilling but familiar account of the rise and fall of a third-world despot. Riding the tidal wave of popular support, Caesar, the Marxist, soon turns into a dictator and plunges his impoverished, exploited nation into a bloody civil war. Fleeing from his burning nation, he lands up in a remote island and declares himself the king. Then the personal descent of a once charismatic doctor-turned-guerilla leader into personal hell begins. *The Minotaur* is born and finally finds his nemesis, in the form of a radicalized native, on that remote island. In the very first chapter, as the scene opens on Caesar, the protagonist who has survived, the second time, his close brush with death after his jet has run into an unexpected storm, lost its altitude and has crashed due to a technical snag or human error, he finds himself on an alien shore looking at the light crimson sky. A beautiful account of Nature meets the eye:

The morning appeared glorious. The immensity of the blue Pacific was an humbling experience for the tiny survivors, stretched out on the white sands, ordinary mortals shorn of office, dominated by the thickly wooded hills in the back. The thick impenetrable jungle, deep and mysterious, started almost at the edge of the white sands, so near you could feel its moist breath tingling your naked skin and also clearly hear hissing of leaves and overhead melody of bird songs in interlaced branches of tall trees. The

air was languid and atmosphere tranquil, turning into a heavenly setting which their hungry eyes found pretty soothing: the entire place generating a feeling of strange timelessness and primeval solitude, almost suggesting eerily the very beginnings of Time itself in that obscure piece of land which no civilized person had discovered so far and which for this precise reason was able to retain its elemental charm. Gawd! This is fabulous! I will call it Paradise. (The Minotaur 6-7)

The Minotaur, the title of the novel, too, is ecologically relevant. It is Caesar, the protagonist, who is aka Minotaur, in the novel. Minotaur, the mythological creature, is half-man and half-bull. Like majority of humankind, the writer reveals, Caesar has both the sides co-existing within him. He says that ‘Minotaur’ is the best myth conceived by the ancient mind to explain the bestiality existing within man. The bull represents power, masculinity and an irrational streak. The writer informs the readers that he is inspired by Picasso’s Guernica and Minotaur Series and how in dealing with the legitimate opposition, a power-strung leader goes on a rampage like a bull and kill right and left under a lofty ideology. When a ruling humane philosophy becomes beastly and corrupt and loses its pristine appeal and justification, it is time it gets replaced by another, more compassionate version of another political ideology, aiming for rule over the hearts and minds of people. Minotaur always gets slaughtered at the altar of Time. Thus, the novel connects with the power discourses of the ancient and modern worlds and shows that people’s verdict is the final arbiter, the last agent of bloody change. Often in this novel, the reader comes across juxtaposition between the jungle- life and that of city-life. In Chapter 1, Caesar and his 20-men group discover the ancient, ruined fort in an unexpected way which is massive and solid in structure with parapets and walls. He proclaims himself the new king of the territory that he calls ‘Paradise’ and all 20 members of the Group, his subjects. He goes to the extent of trampling his Rolex wristwatch and proclaims that time has stopped for all of them: “Time stops for all of us. We are the new pioneers on a new mission. We do not need their time.” (The Minotaur 7)

When at night time in his private chamber of the fort, Minotaur feels the overwhelming presence of people who are trying to communicate with him, he wakes up aware of some invisible presence, the silence of centuries links him with early cavemen living thousands of years ago. He takes a sigh of relief for not being born in the ancient age when mortals were safe from all kinds of dangerous reptiles and creatures only if there was solidarity amongst the clan. At this point of time, he steps out in the central courtyard and is overawed by the majestic beauty of the night in the uninhabited land and like a transcendentalist finds the primeval spirits communing in the jungle at that time. Thus saying:

He felt the cold on his bare skin and found it refreshing. The stars blinked at him and the rabbit in the moon gave one-toothed smile. Mellow dark pulsated around him in waves. The soothing moonlight illuminated his stony pathway. The fort was silhouetted in broad outlines against a silver-hued vastness of the sky. Jungle sounds came in filtered and subdued on the wings of the wind. He was overawed by the majesty of the night and the setting, so balming to his mind still rankling with the recent defeat and disgrace. The night looked so tender, soothing and mystical, different from the artifice of the city lit up by the sodium vapour lamps. It is wonderful! This serenity and the tranquility! Primeval spirit of the jungle Communing. (The Minotaur 43)

In Chapter 2, the powerful Mark Livingstone, respected as the overall leader, by the Hararas who are scattered on all the islands, is all admiration for the rainfall that lends a surreal touch to the cloudy afternoon. Enchanted, he finds it musical lending harmony to the entire universe:

Mark Livingstone was watching the rainfall in straight sheets. The dense rain and the greenery thick as a vertical column intermixed freely, the greyness of the rain lending a surreal touch to the whole surroundings in the light-darkness of the afternoon. The heavy forest was dripping with rainwater. The curtain of the rain was moving fast from the dark skies to the damp wet floor of the brooding forest, a tall curtain joining heavens with the mother earth. Rains had always fascinated the white Harara. Rains that regenerated the forest and made it alive. The large settlement was being lashed furiously by the divine waters, producing its own harmony and sweet music. (The Minotaur 67)

Caesar projects himself as a true transcendentalist as he gets connected with history of the yore looking at the moon:

He stopped at the edge of the central courtyard and watched the ruins of the fort in the milky whiteness of the moonlight. Moon –the constant source of romance, poetry and philosophical speculations- the lonely wanderer in the blue infinite space, looking down upon the earthlings every night for millions of years, spreading cool light in the pathways of solitary wayfarers, cheering them up from his empyrean heights. The handsome rugged moon, full-faced, glowing as a lamp in the dome, connecting him up with the first inhabitants of the earth, when no time existed! (The Minotaur 43)

Shaman, the ancient Harara, spreads a word that the new chief is protected by the King Cobra and brings luck to the tribe. He also informs the council that every new chief has to undergo a test in which the new chief has to go to the sacred temple in the shadows of the Mount Ra, hundred and fifty miles from the settlement for the fire test. If the fire- god accepts him, the tribe also accepts him. He informs them he will accompany the new chief to the sacred temple as a guard to witness and that the new chief has to submit to the authority of the fire god before him. As Caesar is desperate to take the powerful position of the tribal chief in order to win the loyalty of the tribal clan, they start before dawn- the ancient Harara and Constantine Caesar. The entire village of Hararas gathers to bid the two farewell. As they forge in the jungle, Caesar gets awed by the majesty of the jungle- the entangling creepers and giant trees. He finds the jungle alive with birdcalls. And he says:

It is like entering a different world. Shadows and pale light creating an illusionary zone. The twisted pathways. The slumbering jungle which could be the grave for a lost traveler with its criss-crossing trails, dangerous animals and biting insects, the slithering reptiles and poisonous berries.... (The Minotaur 155)

He is enamoured by the mystique of the forest, dwarfed by the huge trees –forgotten ages clinging to the two of them. He is sad and depressed to note that today human beings recognize no other values than power and wealth:

Wilderness is a wrong term? Jungle has its own life. The first home to the human beings, plants and animals. Modernity and thirst for profits have destroyed this prime habitat. A priceless treasure, an album of the nursery of humankind when gods, giants, devils played with the highly- imaginative children, now lost and beyond retrieval for the adult rationalism of the modern, post-industrial world. An association beyond reclamation! (The Minotaur 157)

And later when he wakes up in the middle of the night and stretches himself, he calls the outdoor eternity, the balm for his spirit: “The jungle calmed him up. His nerves were shot. The outdoors, the eternity just balm his spirit.” (The Minotaur 160) In the meticulous handling of the narrative by the author, even Nature becomes a powerful character whether it is an account of the rain, the moon, the dark night or the Pacific Ocean. In the following lines, the writer describes the Mexican desert as intimidating, one that spelt death to the wanderers who have lost their way and the ranch like a fortress:

In the blazing Mexico desert, the big ranch was a visual relief. The ranch was spread across acres of a wasteland dotted with cacti. The desert was immense and intimidating. It spelt death for those wanderers who had lost their way in its vastness. The tough terrain and conditions could drive anybody crazy in that land of sand except the locals or the Arabs. He remembered the lush forest, the dripping rain on the tree branches, the singing river, and the quiet blue Pacific Ocean. The rain has its music, pitter-patter, that sounds heavenly. The river and the big ocean have their own symphonies. He, deliberately, stopped thinking. The ranch was like a fortress. The outer parameters were electronically wired. Any contact with the live wires meant death. There were towers, search-lights and barbed wires. The desert was a suitable place for setting up the ranch for the would-be merchants of death. Any intruder or inquisitive inquirer could be seen from a mile in the flat featureless desert. Besides it could not afford any hiding place to any curious person. The ranch was a hundred miles away from the nearby town and the only means of transport was either a twin-engined plane or a sturdy land rover, and, both could be easily spotted by alert sentries. In the cold desert nights, the drone of a light plane or the spatter of a land rover could be heard easily. Besides that, there were landmines planted along the outer parameters that could blow any intruder into pieces. A squad of bloodhounds had the run of the place in the night. (The Minotaur 118-119)

Natural mythology is being created and evolved through the variety of names designated by the writer. In Chapter 1, spiritual symbols are manifest in the sun, wind and rain: The chief deity, too, of the Harara tribe is the sun god, followed by the cobra and the fierce wind and rain gods. (The Minotaur 16)

The names -Chameleon, Gorilla and Hydra-the local police are purely allegorical. Gorilla, the six-feet two-inch tall, scar-faced giant, is nicknamed so for his massive physique and strength. Chameleon is the vital link between Gorilla and the rest of the Hydra –the brilliant tactician,

he was the ultimate and the champ in the words of the novelist. He was the dream of every spymaster. A master with disguises, fluent in tongues- ancient and modern, expert with explosives, a Masters from Harvard in Anthropology, he was taught the art of wrestling and the poisons by the Apaches, Kung Fu by Master Lee. The members of Hydra, are the elite of the elite corps of the secret service, the ultimate killing machines, programmed to kill and survive in the most hostile climates, loyal only to their chief. They could remain without food, and water for many days, eating the natural resources available in their immediate local conditions-the all—terrain machines out to finish the job assigned at any cost. They were not afraid of any living things—fear was alien to their system—but only of their superior because failure meant death by the firing squad in the compound off the fortress- like headquarters of the Hydra- the secret police. They were not allowed to marry or drink. (The Minotaur 10)

Apart from this, when Caesar is being escorted by the ancient Harara for the fire test and at night time dozes off, he sees all dangerous animal species in his dream - the wolves prowling, growling and stalking him and vultures flying in the air. As he wakes up, sweaty and wet, he finds that he has been saved by the ancient Harara of the cobra who was now headless and writhing around in its last throes of death.

Another reference of the Nature being home to the dead souls and spirits is in Chapter 3. It is the same night when Caesar is going to visit Mount Ra for the fire-test when after waking up from the dreadful dream, he witnesses two aborigines in loincloths and blood-shot eyes throwing a menacing look at him. Then other primitives too appear-short and stocky, well-built and well-muscled. Intimidated, he just prays and waits for the army of hunters to attack him. However, the night passes away making him feel that the jungle is playing tricks on him. As the duo resume journey in the morning, Caesar recounts his experience of the night to the ancient Harara and he stops dead in the track and stares open-mouthed at Caesar. After thinking for a long time he tells Caesar that they were the spirits of Hararas:

You were lucky. They were the spirits of the Hararas. Forefathers. Going back over the sleeping ages buried in the forest here. This land is sacred. Their bones are scattered here about. Very few Hararas are permitted here by the law. Those who know the correct rituals and history are permitted. The men who lead good austere life. You saw the rare spectacle, which very few among us have witnessed. I knew one or two old men who had seen these holy spirits and communed with them. Their description fitted yours. I saw one or two of our sacred ancestors on my occasional visits here. And now, very soon, we will be entering a sacred place, the heart of the most holy place for us. You have to be cautious and respectful. Enter with the open mind of a child and you will get amply rewarded here.” (The Minotaur 161)

Jungle is described as infested with supernatural elements and spirits. It's mystery and suspense ignite awe, wonder and fear in the protagonist. Again, after this there is beautiful description of the journey enroute Mount Ra that opens up new magical and mysterious realms before Caesar. He experiences an enchanting world of fluidity and musical silence and feels as if he is connected with the earlytage of humanity: "...Hoary ages, buried deep and preserved in the virgin forest, sprang up like a sturdy drawbridge, connecting up with the early childhood of humanity..." (The Minotaur 162)

A new sense of wonderment is rekindled in him that sheds off his skepticism and rationalism.

He thinks he is privileged in witnessing the sweet purity of a stage of the history denied to his peers and the breath-taking view is described in an artistically brilliant manner by the writer:

Realms were opening up fast like a long hall of doors that led to more doors. Drenched in the mist, they walked quietly, afraid to disturb the sanctity of the place where the gods played with the early humans, the paths undulating among gigantic trees, the valleys rushing up and hills sloping down gently, a profundity deep and overwhelming, touching the very center of heart. The wind was caressing them and whispering melodious songs. The scent coming off from the flowers was invigorating and rejuvenating. Caesar felt lightness of being for the first time. Bliss overcame him. I want to die right here, in this unique state of blessedness! Almost drunk, he went on, greedily expecting more of this nectar, this manna, which he had never tasted before in any situation in his life—both as the President or as a commoner. His narrow heart expanded and felt full. He was utterly contented, despite the absence of power, wealth and prestige. I am at peace and happy. And then the mist vanished equally suddenly, revealing a new vista of experience for him. There, in full glory, was the Mount Ra. Kissed by the fluffy white clouds. Splendid! A breath- taking view. He was reminded of the White Mountains of Afghanistan. The Mount Ra sprang up abruptly in their field of vision: Huge, solid. Dominating the entire landscape: a range of tall mountains; the tallest one the sacred Mount Ra of the large tribe of the Hararas, its peak summit rising above other mounts, like a defiant gesture in massive stones sculpted by some invisible sculptor, to the empyrean heights of the blue vault. It was glittering in the cold rays of the sun; blanched white, the brilliance almost blinding. A white diamond! (The Minotaur 162-163)

Thus, any vigilant reader will not fail to find the strong ecological echoes that are recorded finely in the very fabric of the plot of this political text thereby making explicit the tacit message of the writer that Nature is something extremely important that needs to be preserved, treasured and treated with deference. Caesar himself calls the purity of Nature as nectar, as manna and feels invigorated, rejuvenated and full of bliss. He wants to die in that unique state of blessedness. In a way, the writer wants to communicate that in order to develop human beings with the right mix of apathy and empathy, their proximity with Nature is utmost important that helps people in regaining their composure even in adverse circumstances. Wealth and power are not the only two things that bring solace. Nature brings peace and tranquility to modern human soul and mind. Propinquity to Nature is crucial to maintain the

mental balance even during crises. For this reason, Nature needs to be conserved. Minotaur, a power-drunk dictator also finds ages buried in the misty forest, ruined fort and the tall pyramids. All of these have history concealed in them and ancient spirits of the Harara community are rich transcendental references. Overall, The Minotaur is a rich and lyrical tribute to Nature and posits that it is the fountainhead of spiritualism, humanism and an ethical way of life (as represented by the simple lifestyle of the Hararas there). Ultimately, as Constantine Caesar comes to learn before his tragic end that Nature can correct the mistakes of humankind and the code of the Hararas is an ideal one which integrates Nature and their life in a harmonious manner, those who try to tamper with such a natural order are bound to be vanquished.

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