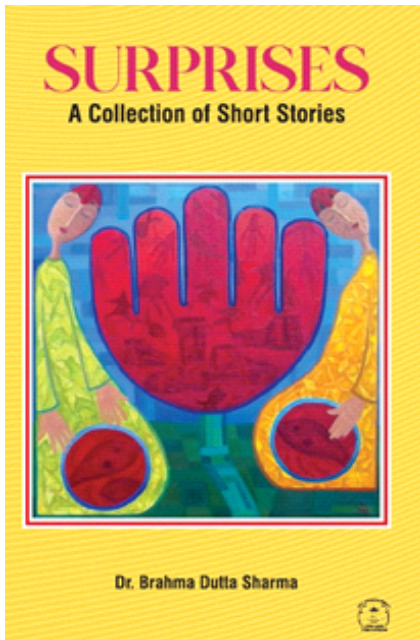
Brahma Dutta Sharma. *Surprises: A Collection of Short Stories.* Delhi: Upanayan Publications, 2022, PB, Price: ₹399, US $ 15, € 15. ISBN: 978-93-91467-80-7.

Reviewed by
Kanchan Yadav*



Brahma Dutta Sharma, the author of *Surprises,* is a formerly Professor of English, Faculty of Education in Turba Taiz University, Republic of Yemen. Moreover, he has served in Kumaun University in capacity of the Head of the Department for more than a decade. More than sixty papers have been credited to his name. The literary genres he deals with in writing comprise of Fiction, Poetry, Literary Criticism, Linguistics and History.

This collection, *Surprises,* has forty nine stories in all which majorly deal with his academic and social experiences of India and Yemen. These stories are about surprises one goes through almost daily in social interactions. In the Preface of the book the author says, "I come across ways, views, and actions which are surprisingly novel to me. The surprises they give me are both pleasant and unpleasant. When they are benefits, they are pleasant, but when they are injuries, they are unpleasant (Sharma, ix)."

Sharma's stories are comparatively short in length, woven around his personal experiences and predominantly reflect the persona of the writer. All the stories are written in first person narration in logical manner and reflect the psychology and behaviour of the characters. He has added authenticity to the stories by representing the real characters who left an impact on his psyche. Author's acerbic wit never slackens his firm grip over social issues witnessed by him. His unflinching gaze records the day to day experiences of the academic as well as the non-academic ethical, moral and spiritual world. He has picked up the characters from different social classes. They are from rural as well as the urban background. The Protagonist

in almost all his stories is the narrator himself. He is forthright, unequivocal, and a law abiding person.

Humanism is all pervasive as it is the prominent feature of his stories. His first story titled "Yes, My Position was Vulnerable", deals with the writer's description of a diarrhoea patient whom the author suggests homemade remedies and feels guilty of doing so later because the patient doesn't trust him. However, at the end of the story he convinces him (the patient) to consult a homoeopath doctor who helps him a lot and consequently the patient thanks the author.

His second story, "A Considerate Robber", tells his experience of Yemen, where the narrator is robbed by a taxi driver and his fellow passengers but after discovering the current economic status of the narrator through his wallet, the driver leaves him unharmed. "An Evacuation" discusses the evacuation of the working Indians from Yemen as the war takes place between Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The author discusses the sweet and bitter experiences of Yemen during his travel to India. "Ansoor the Squeeze" too discusses bitter experience of Yemen which provides a glimpse of corruption.

Mention of temples and shrines in the stories "My Prayer to Mansha Devi" and "With the Blessings of Bankey Bihari" provides a peep into his inner world. His thankfulness to God is evident in most of the stories.

"The Sole Option Left for Me", "My Smile Irked Them", "For Truth's Sake", "My Maiden Speech in the University" and "They Refused to Budge" discuss his experiences of the Academia World of India. The narrator finds himself surrounded with the conflicts, politics and opposition of his colleagues because of his true and honest nature but most of the times he manages to overcome the difficult situations.

"An Insurance Agent Out and Out", "All for a Biri", "I left his wealth Intact", "For a Fraction of a Paisa", "That Coal Black Boy", "A Falcon" are such stories which present the author's dealing with the people around him. The strange behaviour of the people hit to the core and he couldn't resist mentioning them. Initially the narrator believes in people but in course of time he finds their behaviour disappointing in most of the stories.

Another group of stories deal with the social and political conflicts of the independent India. "A Martyr of Uttarakhand", "Are they Really Non-Violent" and "Exodus from Kashmir" are the ones of such kind. "Exodus from Kashmir" is a superbly crafted story which represents different perspectives of Triloki Nath and Ameer on Kashmir and its situation. The prevailing tension in the Kashmir Valley

has been depicted through the lens of Triloki Nath. His experience of vacating his Kashmir home and the disheartening consequences has been well recorded in this story. "Democracy at the Grass-Roots" discusses the hegemony of the village *pradhan* and exploitation of the villagers particularly Om Dutta, who is compelled to leave his house, and discusses it with the narrator. Through these stories the author has presented the post-independence social issues of India.

"Since She was Not in a Mood to Prepone", "An Erroneous Judgement", "He Chose to Adopt a Girl Child", and "A Faulty Judgement" revolve around the significant family ties of the narrator. The pleasant and unpleasant experiences with the family members have been recorded in an interesting manner in these stories.

The narrator doesn't flinch from his ideals and duties in any circumstance. "Who Would Say That?", "I Refused to Deviate" and "His Vendetta" depict the honesty of the protagonist towards his job. He refuses to entertain friends and relatives as far as his professional life is concerned particularly during the evaluation of exam scripts.

Sharma presents his narrative with an unwavering sense of purpose and mettle. He casts a penetrating gaze at the human behaviour in certain circumstances which often appear as surprises to him. Shades of envy, distrust, faith, manipulation, guilt, sarcasm, vendetta and other emotions are vivid in this book.

This collection conglomerates all the elements of short story which make this work a good piece of art and most of the stories fall under the category of Story of Character. The book features the description of the vicissitudes of the narrator's life. Regionalism of R. K. Narayan along with the blend of Humor and Pathos of Charles Dickens is evident in the book. The stories are written in simple and cogent style and the characters are relatable which make *Surprises* a worthy read.

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