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Dhoti and Other Poems, by Dr. P.Raja. New Delhi: Authorspress, 2014. Price: Rs.195, \$10.

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The collection under review is a deviation from his previous collection, **Five-headed Arrow** (2013) which deals with love poems. Back to his earlier collections, Raja has once again filled the present collection with humour and irony. The collection has 54 poems written on mundane themes with a sense of humour and ease. The opening poem “*Dhoti*” is a recollection of an experience in his life. The poet is used to wearing lungis most of time. On the day of his mother’s death, he was given a dhoti, “immaculate white with no border” (13). Until then the poet did not know how to wear dhoti, and his father had taught him “amidst tears/the wearing of dhoti.” “While trousers suffocated” his groins, the poet recalls humorously, “dhoti gave me all AC comfort” (13). Ironically enough when the poet wanted to wear dhoti sloughing off his trousers, father whisks away his dhoti saying “wait till I die”. On the one hand, the narration runs humorously, on the other one is touched by the pathos it evokes at the end. This is Raja’s technique, distinct and inimitable.

Longing for the unknown/unknowable is denoted in the poem “*If only there is Gate...*” (21). “*The Hungry Gecko*” (22-3) vividly captures a gecko on the hunt “trying to catch a meandering cockroach”. Unregretful, the poet says, noticing the gecko smacking its “teeny-weeny lips” after capturing the cockroach, “hunger knows no rhyme or reason” (22). “*Traffic Jam*” (24) is a metaphor for his overcrowded ideas. “*A Green Doubt*” (27) is a poignant poem in which the poet recalls how a coconut tree which was planted by his grandpa in the front yard of his ancestral Home did not live “to see the seedling grow”. Ironically, the poet’s father slips and falls “on a rainy day/and didn’t ever get up.” The tree yields pleasures to the poet “without being sure/of whom it should be grateful to “(28). In the poem “*Mondays*” (29) the poet becomes philosophical. Though “weekends do make/difference” to the poet Monday is always rejuvenating to his “auriferous pen” as “every journey has its own end/as every flower blooms only to perish” (30). The poet loves Mondays “for they bring in Hope/to rejoice in the Truth/of the days that follow” (30).

“*Death Pollution*” (32) is about “Death polluted water world” in which the poet recounts how “lonely gold fish/in the transparent tank/searches for its lost mate” which “had a watery grave”. It is a woeful commentary on the rivers, streams and ponds being polluted by the effluents of industries and waste material thrown by human beings without concern for life in other creatures which is essential for maintaining ecological balance. Concern for the maimed, bruised, orphaned, destitute and damned is the theme of “*A Balance Lost*” (33). The poet tells piteously “around them only grief and anguish, /loss and destruction.” “*Death by a Virus*” (38) is a poem for the HIV+ afflicted patients in which the poet says “death by a virus/is crueller than death by a sword.” A shocking truth indeed it is. In the cryptic poem “*Safety*” (40) the poet says that even God is not spared, and “Himself needs/a shelter and /a watchman”, which means there is no safety for a common man. Everybody lives in a sense of insecurity in the world filled with violence caused by terrorism, communal tensions and other social evils. Also the poet comments sadly on corruption in the society. Even God “needs to be bribed/to get favours done.” A lonely man’s plight is recounted in the poem “*A Lonely Man Foresees His Death*” when a woman whom he considers “heaven sent” leaves

him and that “will be the day of his funerals” (43). Juxtaposed to this is “*Swaroop’s Prayer*” (46) in which a woman makes a humble supplication to God that she should be born as male if such a thing called “rebirth” exists, and if by chance she is reborn a female, she wishes to be born “a queen bee”. It only shows the frustration of being insecure in this world. Having been born as a female, she has no freedom like her counterpart, and “condemned to live in fear.”

In nature God has created the mighty and supreme, but ironically their death is vested in the hands of tiny and negligible. “Be humble and lie low” is the philosophy of these meditations which the poet has recorded. “You hold the queen moon/in captivity,/O Pond!/ yet croaking frogs/create ripples in you”. “You put devilish darkness/to light;/O Sun,/Yet a dark cloud/dims you.” “You break the skull of /a ferocious lion, /O Tusker! / Yet a tiny ant decides your fate” (47). In the poem, “*Artists and Children*” the poet sarcastically comments how artists fight and sulk over the awards and recognition “like little children” and “sometimes a lot worse” (49). Awards should come on their own way; and not the artists should create for the sake of awards. “*In Memory of Aramugum K*” (51) is a tribute paid to a young man who “hanged himself as he failed to get” a fitting job for his qualification. Yet suicide is not the answer for frustration. Life is mysterious. If one fails to shine in one field, may be he/she is destined to shine in other. What one needs to cultivate is the enormous patience which one has to learn by watching nature. Nature is a preceptor as Emerson has said. In the poem “*Fruit of Labour*” (53) the poet tells how a tree sheds fruit on being hit by a dead stone, bleeds and yet forbears. The poet argues there is no need for philosophising life, all that is needed is a close observation, and one can learn several moral and spiritual lessons. “*Woman Power*” (54) preaches a sense of equality between the two sexes. Without man a woman’s life is “a vegetable life”. This might anger the feminists who will not accept the truth of creation. In “*Fish Head*” (56) the poet humorously says how his “eve gluttonous tongue” runs over his lips the moment he sees a cooked fish on a plate. The poet being an incorrigible fish eater cannot resist the temptation of even if the “fish wreaks in vengeance/through its bones” (56). It is nothing for the poet: “peppered and salted with love/its flesh melted on my tongue/while its skull bones caught/in the cave of white terrorists/broke and crushed.” As the fish has found its new grave, its head belched, his beloved smiled at him “with content” as he looked “at her gratefully” (60). For the poet, “love is the key/that opens the door to Heaven” and not marriage which he considers a mere bond. Yet in another poem, “*All for Love*” (65) the poet affirms “there can’t be anything/more genuine than love itself.” “*Language of Love*” (69) is a beautiful poem wherein the poet pens that love and poetry require same sensibilities. He says succinctly, “love has its own poetry/one has to learn/The manners of its language/ As one does with swimming/Before probing the ocean”. Similarly “to enjoy poetry”, the poet says unequivocally, “one has to live it/in its depths.” But the poet goes further in reaffirming that “The language of love demands/More human intelligence than/Sophisticated/computer software can provide.” Love unites two different souls in a mysterious way, the poet says in “*Destiny*” (71). He is rather puzzled at it and asks in disbelief, “How did it all happen? /Aren’t in leaves of different trees shaken off by Destiny’s Hand/only to be brought together/to gloat through eternity?” Only a poet like Raja knows its value “the undeserving hands/know nothing of it” (“*Mistaken Identity*”, 75)

The collection is wonderful, and the poems can be read in one sitting with ease, comfort and in good spirit. It is a cart full of apples to bite and relish sweetness. The reader can hardly expect any hard philosophy. For that matter, Raja is not a hard nut to be cracked but a ripened fruit to be juiced and relished. The undercurrent of his poetry is full of irony

that is subtle, and his humour is brittle to be cracked on the tongue. He has never philosophized life, on the other he has celebrated the fun in it, the trivial and the negligent. One can go to his poetry with ease even if one is not trained in the sensibilities as to how to appreciate it. He is simple and never complicates with linguistic nuances. Raja has the knack of entertaining every reader of all classes with a sense of humour, irony and wit in “an almost unfailing precision of language” to quote Adam Goldgier. Indeed, not only in his precision of language but also in entertaining, he has never failed in all his five collections he has so far published. One has to wait and see whether the next collection would carry the same tempo.