

QUAKING CANTOS. NEPAL EARTHQUAKE POEMS

Yuyutsu Sharma

Analysis by Francesco De Sorbo

Lyric, Elegy

Yuyutsu Sharma's *Quaking Cantos* (2016) is a collection of poems published in response to the earthquakes that struck Nepal in 2015. Sharma's poems navigate themes of collective trauma and social vulnerability, and represent the catastrophe through a fragmented style that aims to evoke the physical and social disruption caused by the seismic swarm.

Year of Publication	2016
Publication Place	New Delhi
Editor	Nirala
Entity	The Nepal earthquakes / Gorkha Earthquake

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Earthquake The Nepal earthquakes / Gorkha Earthquake

REAL EVENT

Time	April 2015
Location	The Himalayas Nepal
Coordinates	28.231900, 84.731652
Impacted Areas	Nepal and northern India, Pakistan, Bhutan, and southern Tibet
Seismic Fault	Main Himalayan Thrust
Magnitude	7.8 Richter
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake

"The main earthquake occurred on the south slope of the Himalaya Mountains" (Wu et al. 873);
"Many aftershocks of magnitude 4.5 Mw or greater followed, of which a Ms 7.5 (Mw 7.3)" (Wu et

Anthropization Level

Settlements

"About 100,000 private houses collapsed, and more than 256,000 private houses were damaged" (Aryal and Wilkinson 2)

Houses

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Temples

"A total number of 750 buildings with cultural importance were damaged including 450 of them housed inside the Kathmandu valley. In most of these damaged buildings, there was a lack of rigid connection between the brick walls and the wooden beams" (Aryal and Wilkinson 4)

Cultural Heritage Sites

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Ecological Impacts

Physical Landscape Changes

"The main earthquake occurred on the south slope of the Himalaya Mountains and formed a 120–140 km long and about 80 km wide rupture zone with a dip slip of 3.5–5.5 m" (Wu et al. 873)

Social Impacts

Deaths

"Around 9,000 people lost their lives, and more than 23,000 people were injured" (Aryal and Wilkinson 2)

Injuries

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Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites)

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Destruction Of Dwellings

"About 100,000 private houses collapsed, and more than 256,000 private houses were damaged" (Aryal and Wilkinson 2)

Destruction Of Public Buildings

"The death toll of young people could have been much higher considering that nearly 7,000 schools were completely or significantly damaged" (PDNA XIII)

Poverty

"earthquakes will end up pushing an additional 2.5 to 3.5 percent Nepalis into poverty in FY 2015-2016 which translates into at least 700,000 additional poor" (PDNA XIV)

Famine

"A post-earthquake assessment found that food consumption practices have worsened in the affected districts, falling below the levels captured in the preearthquake assessment data" (PDNA 9)

Social Disruption

"The disaster also highlighted aspects of inequities in Nepali society spanning geography, income and gender. Poorer rural areas have been more adversely affected than towns and cities due to their inferior quality of houses. More women and girls died than men and boys, partly because of gendered roles that disproportionately assign indoor chores to women" (PDNA XI-XII); Humanitarian Crisis (Unicef)

Recovery

"This diversity within the homogenous community also provides the ground for community cohesion. Post-earthquake, community members were living together for several days after the earthquake using a common kitchen" (Aryal and Wilkinson 3)

Earthquake The Nepal earthquakes / Gorkha Earthquake

LITERARY EVENT

Location	The Himalayas Nepal
Impacted Areas	Nepal
Emphasis Phase	Pre-disaster (causes / context), Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics), Post-disaster (consequences)
Seismic Risk Ref.	Without reference
Seismic Fault	Main Himalayan Thrust
Typology	Tectonic Earthquake
Anthropozization Level	Religious Buildings And Sites Houses Temples Public Buildings Towns Villages
Ecological Impacts	Pollution Soil Changes Soil Degradation
Social Impacts	Deaths Destruction Of Dwellings Destruction Of Cultural Heritage (Materials And Sites) Destruction Of Facilities Poverty Trauma

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Reactions

Name	Lyrical-i
Native Place	Nepal
Nationality	Nepali
Reactions	Trauma Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Neurosis
Name	Survivor

Gender	Male
Native Place	Nepal
Nationality	Nepali
Reactions	Escape Loss Of Consciousness

Name	Wounded Man
Gender	Male
Native Place	Nepal
Nationality	Nepali
Reactions	Passiveness Astonishment

Name	The Christian Priest
Gender	Male
Reactions	Scepticism Doubt

Name	Grandma
Age	Elderly
Gender	Woman
Native Place	Nepal
Nationality	Nepali
Reactions	Solidarity Empathy Sadness Cooperation

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Affects/Reactions

Name	Humans
Reactions	Fear

Name	The population
Reactions	Escape Rage

Name	Religious people
Reactions	Escape Despair

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	"Cracks" (Sharma "Twisted Galaxies", Line 11) "Compassion Inc." ("Houses", Line 54, "Reeking Armpits" Line 37) "Quake" ("Quake Relief", Line 4) "Abyss" ("A Faint Note", Line 31) "Inferno" ("A Song", Line 59)
Metaphors	"God's giant // hammer fell" ("His Headpiece", lines 16-17) "daggers of divinity / thrust into their throats" ("Cosmic", lines 36-37) "gigantic Sunya / of endless suffering..." ("Sunya", lines 39-40) "grand / canyons of endless grief" ("Course", lines 7-8)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Deified Nature Cruel Nature Death Superstition Hell
Syntax	Simple Sentences, Unconventional Position
Punctuation	High Frequency Punctuation Marks
Morphology	High frequency of abstracts, neutral, indefinite forms

THE POETICS OF FRAGMENTATION IN YUYUTSU'S SHARMA QUAKING CANTOS

1. INTRODUCTION

Yuyutsu Sharma is an Indian poet and journalist writing in Nepali and English. His collection of poems *Quaking Cantos* (2016) was published after the earthquakes that afflicted Nepal and the bordering countries in 2015. The collection, structured as a spiritual descent into the catastrophe, echoes Dante's journey through the underworld and explores the poet's traumatic experience through fragmented verses that mirror the geological instability and social disruption brought about by the seismic events. Through three distinct sections and the integration of photographs taken before and after the earthquakes, Sharma employs interesting textual techniques, including enjambments, suspension dots, and visual interruptions, to recreate the sense of fracture and discontinuity experienced by Nepalese communities. On a thematic level, Sharma's poems navigate themes of collective trauma, religious critique, and social vulnerability, while representing earthquake victims as anonymous figures sharing a universal condition of helplessness. Through personified imagery of a cruel Mother Earth and geological metaphors, Sharma also captures both the randomness of natural disasters and the inadequacy of religious and institutional responses, ultimately creating a literary testimony to one of Nepal's most devastating humanitarian crises.

2. THE 2015 EARTHQUAKES IN NEPAL

The Nepal earthquakes lasted over a month, beginning on the 25th of April at 11:56 (local hour), with a 7.8 Mw quake centred 77 km northwest of Kathmandu, and continued with many aftershocks. One of the strongest shocks hit the country near the Chinese border, 77 km east-northeast of Kathmandu, on the 12th of May, with 7.8 Mw occurred (Wu et al. 873).

The social and ecological damages that afflicted Nepal after these events were immense. Nepal's society plummeted into one of its harshest political and humanitarian crises in history (UNICEF). Most of the infrastructures were destroyed, while more than "100,000 private houses collapsed, and more than 256,000 private houses were damaged" (Aryal and Wilkinson 2), along with circa 750 monuments of cultural importance (4). According to the *Post Disaster Needs Assessment* developed

under the National Planning Commission, the earthquakes of 2015 pushed an additional 2.3/2.5% (+700,000 people) of the population into poverty and increased malnutrition due to the damages to harvests. The most hit victims were the country's rural communities, children, and women, who were exposed to additional risks for being tendentially assigned to indoor chores because of their gendered roles (PDNA XI-XVII).

In this context, Sharma's collection can be considered an attempt to recount the disasters of 2015. His *Quaking Cantos*, whose title echoes Dante's spiritual descent to the underworld, explores the lyrical I's catabasis through the "abyss" ("A Song", line 59) opened by the earthquake's force. Accordingly, the poet's gaze becomes that of a helpless witness, struggling to report an unsayable yet dramatic experience through the composition of poetic fragments to make sense of the voids opened within the "cracks" ("Twisted Galaxies", line 11) left on both the physical and human landscape.

3. SHARMA'S "POETICS OF FRAGMENTATION"

Sharma's *Cantos* is divided into three parts: 1) *I do not generally cry*, 2) *Seven Things that Cause the Quakes* and, 3) *Epilogue – A Song of Extinguished Hearths*. At first glance, such a structure reminds of the three phases that can shape the event's comprehension: the seismic dynamic, the earthquake causes, and the consequences of the tectonic thrusts. However, this division is not intended to communicate any sense of reassuring order. On the contrary, order and linearity are undermined by the very layouts of the poetic collection. In fact, the *Cantos* include several photos taken by Sharma and his friend Prasant Shresth, which alternate between the pages, interrupting the poems' linear succession. By picturing Nepal before and after the quakes, these photos reproduce the idea of a continuous interruption, a 'crack', so-to-say, mimicking, on a textual level, a sort of fluctuation through space and time which resemble that of the tectonic plates.

This uninterrupted waving motion is present since the beginning of the *Cantos*. With his first poem, "Twisted Galaxies", Sharma opens his recollection of the events from 2015 with the image of a lyrical I coming to terms with the post-traumatic condition:

My bed shakes

as I prepare to reclaim

fractured

fragments of my sleep

punctured

by shrill chorus

of Monsoon

cicadas and frogs

coming

from a sullied earth...

In the cracks
of debased glaciers shine

the beguiled stars
of our twisted galaxies,

icons of
our loss and lament. (lines 1-16)

Tormented and unable to sleep in a bed that still shakes, the lyrical I's mind invertedly associates the tremors produced by frogs and cicadas among the outside debris (i.e. the "sullied earth...") with those made by the plates. However, the quake's memory is evoked indirectly, *per absentia*, through the image of the *cracks / of debased glaciers*.

As the poem continues, the lyrical I's mind abruptly changes its focus, moving its attention from Earth to the beguiled stars / of our twisted galaxies. Yet, neither this image nor the nature epitomised by the animals in the fields can bring any feeling of peace. For the lyrical I, the night sky shines with icons of "loss" and "lament", although the origin of this grief and anguish is, once again, never expressed openly.

In this light, each poem in the collection is a step in the journey of self-recovery and gradual exploration of the traumatised memory, recalled in shards and fragments. On a thematic level, this fragmentation is expressed by the representation of single instants within the one-month shakes, destroying houses, religious buildings and entire dwellings. In each of the various fragments, Sharma ponders the vulnerability of the Nepalese society, totally unprepared to handle geological hazards and lacking sufficient awareness of risk-mitigation practices, as the Nepalese live under "porous walls" (Sharma "Course", line 22), now reduced to the shape of a "skeleton of hunger" ("The House", line 23). In this landscape of fear and destruction, the individual and collective reaction to the event is almost unanimous. The Nepalese share a common sense of shock, a wordless astonishment, testified by "big, black eyes marveling" ("Glint", line 12) or being "stunned" ("His Headpiece", line 16) at what happened.

The victim and the survivors are not represented as round characters; they are more like spectres wandering in an underworld emerged from the earth's depths. Their anonymity also reinforces this sense of life-in-death condition, as the several people mentioned in the poems always lack proper names. Once again, this rendered anonymity stresses the impossibility of knowing this disaster entirely. One can learn the numbers of the victims, but it would never be possible to know who these people were. This anonymity could also denote a sense of heartfelt solidarity in the loss. By not mentioning any specific person, Sharma addresses the 2015 tragedy as a shared experience, in which any reader can recognise their story in the poems dedicated to a mother buried under "a pile // of mud / and damp bricks" ("A Burning Sun", lines 22-24), while she was fetching oil from the kitchen for her baby, or to a group of people running for their life "buried beneath / a fatal weight" ("Glint", lines 15-16). In this way, Sharma's *Cantos* represents a universal condition of helplessness for the Nepalese. Such condition is often expressed through metaphors involving a symbolic association of geological elements and the human mind-body. For example, crying tears are described as heavy stones dropped from an emptied soul: "under a bare sky / wet from tears / tumbling / like stones / from the frozen / caverns / of my eyes... ("I do not", lines 11-17).

From a stylistic point of view, the overarching feeling of fragmentation is signalled by the frequent employment of two-verse stanzas composed of few phrases rich with enjambments. It is through the enjambments that Sharma attempts to recreate, on a syntactical level, the sense of separation and disruption the earthquakes have signified for his people. Like the houses and temples that fell and the families that were separated forever, the poet is compelled to navigate through the cracks opened by the quakes and accept the impossibility of filling them. This unexpected, cracked reality is also reminded by the insertion of suspension dots at the end of many stanzas. In this context, the unconventional punctuation is a surprisingly effective device for expressing the notion of emptiness without relying on words, encompassing the feeling of the ground abruptly disappearing beneath one's feet and the voids created by the loss of loved ones, the absence which those left behind still long to fill with familiar sounds.

Regarding the collection's linguistic choices, the poetic imagery of seismicity correlates to the most significant *topoi* employed in the *Cantos*. Earthquakes are represented through the personification of nature, which often appears as cruel entity. This imagery helps Sharma to communicate a sense of human vulnerability towards uncontrollable events and the feeling of rage and injustice manifested by the survivors. Accordingly, the earthquake is conceived by Sharma as the moment when "God's giant // hammer fell" ("His Headpiece", lines 16-17), but it is also defined as "a curse" ("Seven Things", lines 119-121). Similarly, the earth is highly personified throughout the *Cantos*, with the features of both a monster with "jaws" (Sharma "Nipple", line 3) and a cruel mother with a "quaking uterus" ("The Baby", line 41 and "The Earth's", line 23). In the poem "Nipple", a baby crawling towards the corpse of her mother receives "The Kiss / of Death [...] on the cold / chest / of earth" (lines 12-17). In these passages, Sharma represents a careless Mother Earth that causes disruption "as she changed her side / in a cosmic sleep..." ("Cosmic", lines 41-42). However, her cruelty is chaotic, defined as "ulcers of fate" ("A Song", line 144), as much as the earthquakes are unpredictable and random; such unpredictability is further highlighted through the metaphor of Nepal as "a bowl of milk held in the hands of a fearful grandma" ("I see", lines 13-14) poignantly suggests.

The concept of randomness is functional for contextualising another important theme explored by Sharma, i.e. religious critique. While Nepal is often associated with Tibetan Buddhism and spiritualism, Sharma's poems frequently undermine religious orders' role in caring for the community and represent the shakes' overarching force as mightier than any divinity. For instance, the Christian priest in the poem "Cosmic Sleep" naively says to his devotees: "Don't panic, / continue to pray." (lines 1-2), only to die afterwards crushed by the church's fall. The representation of the damages to heritage sites is recurring through the *Cantos* and involves different religions. The sacredness of such places is violated by the earth's shakes, which do not spare either "Gorakh Nath's shrine" ("The Family Deity", line 8), "falling apart / like a cardboard box" ("The Family Deity"; lines 24-25), or "Buddha's own eyes" ("I see", line 23), which "bend and break" ("I see", line 23) as the "Lord's own body cracked into two lifeless boulders" ("I see", line 35). In this way, Sharma dismisses any possibility of a miracle or providential saving from a celestial force, stating the all-too-natural assets of post-earthquake Nepal as "a gigantic Sunya / of endless suffering..." ("Sunya", lines 39-40), where the Sunya is the traditional name for 'zero' in Indian philosophies (Tewari 172).

Nonetheless, Sharma's *Quaking Cantos* does not end in total nihilism. As it has been argued by Serafin (2023), writing about earthquake events opens a creative space for reflection on the human, social and political contradictions that the seism has laid bare, offering the possibility of redemption and renewal (Serafin 15-16). This opportunity is also present in Sharma's poems, for example, in his repeated harsh attacks against Western Dead-Aids, which could exploit Nepal's tragedy for economic interests, epitomised by images of the "disasters camera" (Sharma "Reeking armpits", line 21) and the "knives of the butchers / of a Giant / Compassion Inc." ("Houses", lines 52-54). For Sharma, genuine compassion does not consist in giving from a distance but in getting proximate to the suffering Nepalese people and the victims to whom his collection is dedicated. In his conclusive poem, Sharma expresses the principle lying behind his poetics, stating his intention of the singing of "extinguished hearts..." ("A Song", line 5), whose "life's / flame muffled / in the shrunken / pocket of giant / oxygen cylinder..." ("A Song", lines 6-10) during the Gorkha earthquake.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Sharma's *Quaking Cantos* transcends mere documentation of the 2015 earthquakes to present a profound meditation on trauma and recovery. The collection's fragmented structure and innovative use of visual elements successfully reflect geological instability and social disruption on both textual and psychological levels, creating a unique literary response to natural disaster. While the poems confront the apparent randomness and cruelty of seismic events, undermining traditional religious consolations and exposing societal vulnerabilities, they ultimately reject complete nihilism. Through his dedication to singing of "extinguished hearts" and his critique of exploitative Western aid organizations, Sharma advocates for genuine compassion rooted in proximity to victims rather than support at a distance. Moreover, the lack of characterization in the representation of the people struck by the event transforms individual suffering into universal testimony. By positioning poetry as a vehicle for gradual self-recovery and memory exploration, Sharma demonstrates literature's capacity to integrate traumatic experience into consciousness through symbolic representation, offering both personal healing and social reflection on the contradictions that natural disasters reveal within human societies.

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