

Analysis of *The Sunset Club* by Khushwant Singh

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Indian English Literature is elucidated as the composition of works by authors arising from the continent of India. Indian writers have penned works in a foreign language English whose mother tongue is local languages of India. Indian writing in English was germinated with the seeds sown by the British who ruled Indian for many decades. It took a quite a long time for the Indian writings to sprout, yet today it has bloomed into a full-fledged tree bearing fruits in all genres of literature namely Prose, Poetry, Fiction, Autobiographies, Biographies, Essays, Short Stories, and Drama. The efforts of accomplished men have added colour to the crowning glory of Indian writings. In the recent times, Indian writings have witnessed massive flourishing of authors in the global scenario, all who have been applauded with noble accolades and laurels.

With the dawn of India's independence, Indian writers received freedom to express about the rich culture and heritage of Indian thought in a foreign language English. Very particularly fiction writers have taken a challenge of writing in English and creatively project the ethos of India. M. K. Naik was right when he exclaimed about the creativity and innovative quality of Indian writers in the following words:

one of the most notable gifts of English education to India is prose fiction for though India was probably a fountain head of storytelling, the novel as we know today was an importation from the west".

Khushwant Singh fondly called as the 'Grand Old Man of India', was an exemplary icon of Indian English literature of the post-independence era. Like Emily Dickinson, the transcendental poetess of America exclaimed that 'living is ecstasy', Khushwant Singh too believed in living life to its fullness and believed that life should be a celebration. Through his works, Singh taught the readers how to celebrate life and live it every moment. Khushwant Singh was regarded as one of the most debating and controversial writers of his time since he was a revolutionary figure like the Afro-American novelists who were revolutionary when the white masters treated them with prejudice for being black in their skin. In an interview with Sheela Reddy in *The Outlook*, Amitav Ghosh writes:

Khushwant Singh has made a milestone of everything he has touched....., Singh is unmatched for his variety, acumen and wit. What is more, he is a man of boundless generosity, one of the rare writers who is consistently supportive of them. As much for his personal qualities as for the literary achievements, he is a national treasure. (Reddy 70)

In his fictional articulations, Singh was transparent and laid bare the truth to the readers. He did not cook up or create

anything artificial. He expressed all things in the way he saw or experienced them. Bhatnagar writes:

Singh's depiction of "trauma, disruption, displacement, dispossession, dislocation, distrust, disgust, and violence suffered by the innocent people" in *Train to Pakistan* is like one of the creative writers. Bhatnagar further remarks: Khushwant Singh was the first Indian novelist in English to write about the horror and holocaust of the partition with great artistic concern in *Train to Pakistan*. It is not partition but what it gets associated with and what it becomes symbolic of that attracts the attention of the writer. (Bhatnagar152).

Khushwant Singh's writings evoke an arresting and amazing interest in the readers. His novels -*Train to Pakistan, Delhi, I shall not hear the Nightingale, The Company of Women, and The Sunset Club* and short stories like *The Voice of God, A Bride for the Sahib, and Black Jasmine* deal with the effects of partition. His fiction emits with the odour of his roots in India. His style is hard and vigorous. He employs Punjabi terms and expressions which add flavour and colour to his style and create an everlasting impression on the mind of the readers because his narratives are realistic portrayals.

Khushwant Singh's literary writings interspersed with comedy projected through different types of stylistic devices such as irony, satire, and farce. Singh employed Irony and satire as handy tools to exhibit his notions and thoughts about the cycle of human life. In this context, L. T. Arasu quotes Khushwant Singh in *A Storyteller called Khushwant Singh* (2004):

We Indians may have lost our sense of humour but we still have a rich laboratory of material to work on. Every third Indian is a clown in his own right: self-esteem, immodesty, sanctimoniousness, name-dropping and verbosity make a golden treasury of the ridiculous. (Arasu 50)

The Sunset Club is a thrilling novel which gives glimpse into the life of old-aged people. The novel is a mirror of the gloom and despair which accompanies old men and women in their old age. The central characters discuss about everyday events in life around them and the events that take place in their life and compare it to their own life experiences. As they discuss, the characters in the story, the old men realise how life has changed drastically. They also understand that people too have changed in their attitudes and behaviour.

The novel is symbolic of three old men who represent different types of people human beings normally encounter in their life. The three main characters-Boota Singh is the mouthpiece of Khushwant Singh. He is very transparent about his personal life and misfortunes. Pandit Sharma, the bachelor is a wise old man, and Nawab Baig, seems a respected person who has his own secret stories to be expressed.

Robert Browning prominent literary figure of Victorian era, a poet highly regarded in his time for being exponent of the 'dramatic monologue' gives insights into old age life, in his outstanding poem *Rabbi Ben Ezra*. He stresses that old age is the best phase of life whereas,

youth shows but half (line 6).

Browning believes that old age too has its merits and happiness and not sorrows alone. The wisdom of old age helps Rabbi ben Ezra recognize the truth that pain is inevitable part of life. For him, old age brings acceptance and love of the self.

Singh's plot in his novel '*The Sunset Club*' revolves around stories of three friends who in their ripe age meet at Lodhi Garden every day at sunset. The three friends discuss that old age is a curse unlike Browning's Rabbi who admires old age. Rabbi Ben Ezra finds old age to be a vital phase of peace and happiness. But Singh's three characters particularly the old-aged Boota Singh, felt estranged after he gets the news of one of his friend's deaths. Once again, he curses old age and feels that leading life in old age in India is very difficult especially in the era of globalisation because machine power has made human beings mechanical, materialistic and distance from all kinds of human relationships.

Singh's *The Sunset Club* is evaluated as a light but serious, touching but funny. Singh's literary genius is best expressed in this last novel. As a novelist, Singh provides information about many hidden aspects on his life and creations and assigns him due place in the field of Indo-English. Structurally the novel is divided into thirteen chapters signifying twelve months of the year. The titles of each month are also symbolic. There is Apologia which looks like a Preface followed by the chapters. *Chapter one is titled Lodhi Gardens, 2- The month of Flowers, 3-Spring into Summer, 4-Now that April is Here, 5-May of the*

Laburnums, 6-Month of the Scorcher, 7- Cry of the Peacock, 8- Nothing to celebrate in August, 9- Summer Merges with Autumn, 10-Gandhi's October, 11- The Guru's November, 12- December of the Blue Moon, 13- The Sunset Hour.

The story commences with a brief introduction and description of Lodhi gardens. The novelist expresses the majesty of the garden and Bada Gumbad which is like the bosom of a young woman. Every chapter in the novel represents the calendar months. The chapters are titled accordingly signifying the month. The chapters describe aged men in their mid-80's, who look forward to spending precious times with friends every evening by meeting at the Sunset Club in Lodhi gardens by happily sitting on a bench meant for them.

The three old men are described realistically by Khushwant Singh-Baig is a Muslim who takes liquor, and he is not a believer of Islam. Sharma, the upper caste Brahman is a public servant very critical of Boota Singh. Boota Singh is a gentle, outspoken Punjabi guy. Every day at the sunset hour, the men sit together on a bench in Lodhi Gardens to exchange various news and other things talking about love, lust, sex, religion, and politics. Khushwant Singh portrays his characters in a lively manner by focusing their fantasies and foibles, thus capturing the attention of the readers through the way he describes the characters along with the minute details of everyday life in their households.

The book is not just the story of men in their old age, but Singh has woven the human story which contains different cycle of seasons, mundane things such as the uproar of general elections, violence, natural disasters, and corruption. From this it is very *The Sunset Club* deals with themes of exploration of friendship, sexuality, old age, a celebration of nature, a portrait of India's paradoxes and complexities. The novel is certainly a masterpiece from Singh, a true storyteller who has captured the hearts of the readers through his honesty because the story is real and close to real life.

The Language employed by Singh is simple and readable. Singh's style is amazing and meaningful filled with laughter and this is proof that Singh is a keen observer of humans. The whole book is written with such simplicity that the readers are carried away by the realistic and minute details presented by Singh. The ending of the novel is marked by the sheer truth that: mankind must experience death. This aspect of acceptance of death and the inevitability of death reminds us of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, the Transcendentalist poets from America who projected that Death is a part and parcel of life and none can escape death. The Philosophy expressed by both the poets sound quite horrifying, yet very true. In the same vein, Singh also projects the fact that death is an important event in human life though it makes one feel a little pathetic. The book constantly reminds readers of the power

of Death. The three friends fight and have difference of opinions, yet they are bound by the might of sincere friendships. The notion of death as a fact is expressed in the following lines of the novel:

“Time has taken its toll on you and left you dead,
where are the frivolities of yesteryears?”

The four old men understand the truth that “Seasons do not change to please humans; they are ordained by the inscrutable laws of nature”. The philosophy of Singh is revealed in the words:

I asked for a long life, only four days were granted:

Two went in hoping, Two lost in waiting (TSC 157)

As a realistic story writer Khushwant Singh has employed sharp wit and humour in the story to paint nature in its natural colours through chronicling the life of three old friends and a portrayal of changing values witnessed in materialism leading to degenerate spirituality. The locale or setting of the novel is Delhi. The structure like domes are creations out of repressed instinctual urges. The shapes that human beings distinguish come out of their consciousness. The narrative symbolises descriptions of the dome. The dome stands for the bosom of a woman and other object-minaret, doors, lock, and key represent genitals. Khushwant Singh looks at them in Freudian sense of the world and interprets them on par with Freudian Psychoanalysis for whom instinctual desires are prominent throughout *The Sunset Club*. As a man grows old and nears the time of his departure, the desire to live becomes stronger.

The book is a celebration of the experiences of being human, of the frailties of old age. The title of the novel *The Sunset Club* carries two implications: sunset and club. The sunset symbolises the cycle of life and club represents social concerns. The club that exists after the sunset display things taking place in the light while the sun is setting. The dark abyss as the happenings forms the deeper thoughts of human discourse for showing the social aberrations. In both the cases the novel represents the reality of Indian social system, the perversion of human mind, and the ideologies that are transcultural.

In conclusion, the story about three friends beginning from Republic Day of the year 2009 to Republic Day of 2010 which signifies of human life depicted through his characters by Singh. The characters are full of mirth and joy bubbling with vigour in their life about their fantasies and foibles. Through his poetic talent, Singh makes the readers involve in the events of Delhi, describing the general elections, corruption, violence, and disasters of not just the city, but also the world. On the release of the book, *The Sunset Club*, Gursharan Kaur, said,

"It is an honour to release the book.

It is indeed a privilege for me to be in his good books."

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