

Quasi-attributes, Desires, and Cyclicity of life: A Study of Khushwant Singh's *The Sunset Club*

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As a realistic story writer Khushwant Singh penned more than a dozen books including half a dozen novels and was a regular columnist in one of the leading Indian daily *The Hindustan Times*. His vast knowledge and sharp wit and humour elicits disbelief and admiration. The book under discussion entails India, its people, the diverse unity prevailing in the country, the division and the rift among people, and nature in all its hues, through the epitome of Delhi while chronicling the life of three old friends and a pertinent portrayal of a fast changing values evinced in materialism falling sort to display equivalent growth in spirituality.

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Singh as an accomplished fictionist raises serious concerns such as the issues of partition, the changing values of society, the relative mode of human nature, and the psychological probing. In *The Sunset Club* Khushwant Singh recalls his experiences and recollects them as old wine as they take shape in the form of a weakly knit story with sparsely any plot or a theme to convey and can be best called in his own words 'analects.' The greatest aspect of them being utmost honesty the writer is known for. Khushwant Singh proclaims *The Sunset Club* to be his last novel, a tale of three friends for over forty years now, in their eighties: Pandit Preetam Sharma, Nawab Barkatulla Baig and Sardar Boota Singh, who meet each day at the sunset hour and sit together on a bench in Lodhi Gardens, exchanging their views on each passing day, talking about everything from politics, religion, love, lust, culture, modernisation, and sex.

Set in picturesque form for the locale of Delhi, the novel traces their life in a calendar year from January 2009 to January 2010, where Khushwant Singh sketches his characters with utmost precision, right from their physiognomy, idiosyncrasies, and fantasies of old age. Another distinct aspect of the novel and the writer's ability is of dealing with the old age and thus the novelist seems to answer what do old men think about? They discuss everything in that one year as the seasons change the views of the three undergo a change. They debate, contest, and even to an extent fight over burning issues faced by the country representing the three most distinct and most important communities that go into the making of nation. Their dealings on the *boorah binch* every evening carry out a discussion on either, politics, society, religion, culture, tradition and pre-eminently death and sex—these fantasies, of the three old men, can be interpreted in Freudian context as the death drive and a drive to live. It has for its background the element of loneliness that go into the life of the

three men.

The three chief characters in *The Sunset Club* do not come from different walks of life, but stand as a representative figure of the different walks of the nation. They resemble and stand for the whole community and are spokesman of the same. It has to be remembered that the author selects the representatives of three major communities of the nation on basis of their strength and religion and blurs away the boundaries that separate the three. Extracting the shortcomings of each, Khushwant Singh presents the replica of a true Indian with all his idiosyncrasies and frivolities. While we find their portraits taking shape the author deciphers the broad lines that are not supplied by cast, culture, or religion but are the prominent characteristics of a nation. He describes humorously one by one the three. First and the eldest of them is Pandit Preetam Sharma, who is in:

... good health but needs glasses to read, hearing aids to hear and dentures to eat... One wall of his drawing room has a bookshelf packed with books which he has not read, nor intends to read. They create the impression that he is a man of learning. (6)

He represents the sense of a true Indian who has everything to prove what he appears to be despite putting the same into practise. It is perhaps more important to create “the impression” that you are a “man of learning” with a “bookshelf packed with books.” As for visitors at your house will only see the bookshelf and not their owner reading them.

Nawab Baig as the second character is as a Sunni Musalman and comes of *pathan* ancestors settled in Delhi before the coming of British. Baig does not believe in amassing books, in fact “he finished with them after school and college.”(7) Like an ideal Muslim he was educated at Aligarh Muslim University and later settled in his father’s business. He has courted courtesans and maid servants of his house at the same time being “a faithful husband.” (8)

Khushwant Singh infuses lighter moments through the lustful details of Sardar Boota Singh, who takes great pride in drinking, swearing, philandering, and recounting his sexual exploits. His character presents a typical case study in Freudian Psychoanalysis who enjoys sexual pleasures, *libido*, even in farting (Freud, 16: 357). The three spent the days sharing their thought, sometimes reconciling with each other and sometimes fighting on social, political, economic issues and above all their own sexual fantasies.

Khushwant Singh’s view about the shape of domes and sculptures comes out from the Freud’s views of the formation of culture and society where sex has been the source of inspiration behind every human design. He states the reasons for the popularity of *Jami Masjid* built five centuries ago:

“The reason for its popularity is its dome, which is an exact replica of a young woman’s bosom including the areola and the nipple. Most mosques and mausolea have domes but they have metal stripes put on top of them which rob them of their feminine charm... You can gape at it for hours on end and marvel at its likeness to a virgin’s breast. You will notice that men sprawled on the lawns have their face towards it; their womenfolk sit facing the other way.” (5)

What is the most distinguishing factor that Singh puts in here is the deep truth that we are Indian and we are made up of Indian cognition. He regards Indian national unique because:

“The truth is, we Indian are full of contradictions: we preach peace to the world and prepare for war. We preach purity of mind, chastity and the virtue of celibacy; we are also obsessed with sex. That makes us interesting.... that’s the kind of people we are.” (3)

We Indian live in a town of our own where we have no place for the reality and have created walls and rules that have no basis. These structures like domes and most of the other ones are creations out of our repressed instinctual urges. There is no denying of the fact that sex has been the primordial thought of men. This is one of the foremost instincts and Freud states that it has been chief source of all non-instinctual art (Storr: 92). The shapes we distinguish come out of our consciousness which is prefixed in our unconsciousness of human body shape and genitals.

The suggestive narrative also reveals the passionate descriptions of the dome. It is not merely the dome that represents the bosom of a woman but other objects—as well as our language—too like a minaret, doors, buckets, lock and key, etc are symbolically related to genitals. Khushwant Singh looks at them in Freudian sense of the world and interprets them in at par with Freudian Psychoanalysis.

In *The Future of an Illusion* and *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud: vol, 21) Freud puts forward the thesis that the source of both religious practices and the practices of civilised society is the repression of instinctual urges. Civilisation as we know it exists because humans are capable of the process of sublimation, the process by which instinctual urges—demands for sex, food, and death—are changed into non-instinctual behaviour—such as politics, art, and music. Freud's proposes that it is the repressive restrictions of civilisation that prevent most of us from acting on our desires.

These instinctual desires are prominent feature throughout *The Sunset Club*. As a man grows old and nears the time of his departure, the stronger in him becomes the desire to live. His mind gets more and more occupied with his youth and his sexual fantasies. Khushwant as a skilled novelist creates the seriousness when he makes an application of the psychological theories related to analysing the inner aberrations and the latents of human psyche. The two facets of personality *Eros* and *Thanatos*—*Eros* is an instinct to direct a person towards pleasure seeking and to live; and *Thanatos*, is the death instinct (Freud, 19: 40-47)—are apparently more emphatic in a man's life at the time of his old age than at any other time of his life. A man starts to think at this point: If death is the destiny than what do we strive for? We will hardly be remembered by the posterity despites our achievements of whatsoever worth they be.

Catharsis as the emotional intensity of human nature is achieved towards the end of the story. We find that Sardar Boota Singh at the end of the novel opens his telephone book and crosses out the name of the now deceased Pandit Preetam Sharma and Nawab Barkatulla Baig with the letter **D**. Signifying dead, the date, month, and year of their passing away and also adds to his own name with the word **D**. leaving for the date, month, and year to be filled in. (215)

As the year has passed by two of his friends are dead the *Sunset Club* ceases to exist and no one takes any note of it. Life of seasons and the year has come a full cycle. It is the time of the beginning of a new year when he finally pulls himself out of gloom and goes to the Lodhi Garden, occupying the bench all by himself and gazing at the Bara Gumbad, yet still resembling the fully rounded bosom of a young woman.

The book is organized in thirteen chapters; with each of the twelve months of the year having a chapter and one chapter for itself. The Lodhi Gardens of Delhi have along chain of clubs buzzing around namely, for Yoga, Physical fitness, political gatherings, and the like. One such reference is the 'Laughter Club.' Of which Boota wonders, "... if artificial laughter can lighten people's mind than artificial crying must do some good as well." (44)

Here Khushwant Singh draws a thick parallel between the two class of people found in India.

One represented by the members of the laughter club who insist on “artificial laughing... when there is nothing to laugh about” (46); and, second he himself, who insist on seeking pleasure and comfort in reality—as that of the beauty of the *Bara Gumbad* which is the replica of a young virgin’s bosom. The first are an artificial people who have no feelings for flowers, greenery, architectures, and live a mechanical life; and, the second is the author and his Sunset Club members who are nature lovers. Though in their old age they very much enjoy celebrating the hidden thoughts of human minds and dubs the former ones as, “khotey—donkeys.” (44)

The book opens in the month of January—a time to start—when the winters have started easing out with bright sun back into the sky:

By the end of January, winter loosens its grip; by sunrise, foggy dawns turn into sunny mornings; the time for flowers and the calling of barbets is round the corner. (2)

January is also the month of republic day celebrations—the most pompous one of a democratic and peace preaching country. The discussions of *The Sunset Club* flare with the matters pertaining to that of the republic day, freedom matters, literature, Delhi, and India and of course drinking and sex. Mr. Singh comes out with his testimony about Indians:

“We are people full of contradictions. On one side we have a couple who break all the rules of propriety, on the other fundos like those of Ram Sena in Mangalore who beat up boys and girls for drinking beer in a pub. (34)

Though the testimonies are true, but there is nothing substantially worth noting here. References to them are easily traceable in other of Khushwant Singh’s works. His earlier novels like *The Company of Woman*, his autobiographies, *Truth, Love and a Little Malice*, and *Absolutely Khushwant* are abound with collection of such images and long descriptions of his sexual behaviour. All come out of the mind of an ageing soul, tired, and not having much new to add to his vision/thoughts.

February in India is the time of *Basant Panchami*—a time which is more important to the North Indians as it is the season of reaping a crop and the advent of festivities which are to be observed in both February and in March. A time associated with, flying kites, flowers, and a “riot of colours.” (37) It is also the season of love-making.

Both February and March are month when winters give way to approaching heat of summer. February is much cooler and more pleasant. The coming of March pronounces the end of winters and the advent of summer. Time from mid February through the first fortnight of April is the dominated by different festivals that are celebrated differently across religion and communities of India.

Khushwant Singh calls March a season where “death and rebirth go hand in hand.” (60) The discussion of the Sunset Club presents the serious social concerns of the novelist such as the picture of a society divided by religion, torn by casteism, and exploited by politicians. He exposes the hypocrisy amidst the Indian masses irrespective of caste, culture, or religion. The discussion of the club once again comes down to what a man wants to talk about most: “The most memorable sex encounter you have had in your life.”

As April dawns the coming of summer increases, the apprehensions and worries of old age. The peripheral line that distinguish the three are drawn—more vividly drawn here as each celebrate their own religious beliefs with only one mentionable phrase that distinguishes all Indians irrespective of religion and caste is “*ram bharosey*.” Whenever we do not know solutions to

problems we leave the same on the will of god. The club continues its usual discussions. We find here that the book seldom deals with passion and fantasies but pre-eminently with lust that fills the human mind. As Boots puts it in refereeing to one other of his sexual exploits:

I did not want to show my eagerness to accept her offer, so I did not ring up for the next two days. But I thought about her all the time, and my desire to know her better became compulsive. (88)

Khushwant Singh here captures another truth of human heart which carries in it a lust that has more or less become an obsession and it tries to evade the same until it becomes a compulsion.

The development of inner sensuous nature is linked with the natural phenomenon. The unpredictability of the month of April and its weather arouses amidst them a debate over cultural and political issues that go in to present a society which is not merely divided but this division as a bond of united discord breathes life into the Indians. As Sharma in his lectures reflect:

India's caste system can be compared to human body. The head is Brahmin, the arms and torso are Kshatriyas—the fighting type like Rajputs, Marathas, Sikhs. The pelvis and thighs are Vasihyas—the trading castes like Baniyas and Marwaris who look after the economy of the country. Sudras are the legs and feet on which body stands. They do menial jobs—they are sweepers, cobblers, removers of carcasses. It is a division based on functions expected to be performed, so caste system cannot be dismissed as outdated rubbish. (99)

The heat of May does bring some respite in their usual talks and they turn on to question their own lives: "... few of ... countrymen show much interest in trees, birds or animals—they are far more interested in politics, money, scandals or religion." (103) The same is the matter with the Sunset Club only Boota loves nature and describes the flowering of Laburnums as:

A mass of canary gold dripping down like bunches of kandahar grapes. You gape open-mouthed at this miracle of beauty. No fragrance, only gaudy showers of gold. Their glory lasts barely a week. (102)

Sharma expresses his ignorance about the laburnums, while Baig question the value of a flower without any fragrance and dubs them "a good looking woman without character." (103) The trio continues their usual discussions of the evenings concludes with a messy interpretation of *Bhagwat Geeta* that when Castes intermingle clashes occur (105), commenting upon the social scenario of India. Their views strengthen the point that we Indian live a life of falsehood, fake belief, and ideals that shall go to shatters to first sunshine. They rejoice the congress rule in the country overlooking the fact that congress rule is a symbol of slavery and not of democracy in the nation.

June is as hot as hell but it ushers in the season of mangoes and the ushering of monsoon. Khushwant Singh's description of mangoes is worth noting.

The Mango is a messy fruit to it. That is one reason that citizens of Indian subcontinent are about the only people who relish it and call it the king of fruits. (116)

The citation deals with the natural image which becomes again revelation of the inner consciousness of human being. It is not the mangoes that are portrayed here. It is the broad characteristic of the Indian masses that has been summed up briefly.

July is a difficult season in India. The coming of monsoon brings a lot of hardships in the life of an average Indian. Unreliable rains disrupting the traffic and transport are the usual feature. The trio's hot discussions often lead to a clash between them. We observe another prominent feature of

an Indian. As the three represent distinct communities we find that one enjoys the other two fighting. The same is often reflected in the Indian society where strife betwixt two communities is relished by the other as entertainment.

August is the season when Lord Vishnu—preserver of life, descends to the bottom of the ocean and goes into deep slumber. This is called *Pralaya*—chaos, Season that adds misery to human life with multiple diseases.

Though unseason rains disrupt life in the month of September, the sun merges with autumn, this change in season has been described in the words of Sanskrit poet Kalidas who describes autumn with womanly charms of old age and nature. Here again the season festivities in India dawns. Though the three are unreligious in nature we observe through them the idiosyncrasies of Indian culture despites the division caste, customs, and religion.

October sees the festivities in full light. It is also the month of Mahatama Gandhi. With a change in season a change in the people is also observed—transmigration. When the club meet, they praise Gandhi as the greatest man who drove British out of India at the same time had certain eccentricities. Boota gabs the opportunity to make a point about Gandhi’s vow of celibacy and the long battle he fought to control his libido. Boota here goes on to offer his vague philosophy that he has formulated concerning sexual behaviour of man. There is just as one aspect of Khushwant Singh’s Philosophy that is worth mentioning in fact there is hardly any philosophy except lust. He states, “Sex is on everyone’s mind. Some more, some less...” (157) These lines remind one of Darwin’s theory stating that we are close to animals ‘more closely related to some’ and more ‘distant to others.’ (Easthope: 168)

The debates here reveal more pertinently the divide that is in the nation. We preach and pray Gandhi but never follow his ideals of truth.

November with its festival of lights brings in cold waves back into play. Though each of them boasts of their own religious festivities and looks down upon the others. Their debates reveal that we are people with all ill doings and still call ourselves pious. The statement we are living in a land where if you “are caught taking a bribe, you can get away by giving bigger bribes.” (171)

December brings the year to a close. It is time for us to reflect over the doings of the past and prepare for the future. Though there debates will not come to an end but the year has. It is symbolic of life—one complete cycle from birth to death.

The coming of cold transfers the chill of the season to the blood too. It is opined that this is the time of the year when old people fall ill and die more often than at any other time of the year. The bracing cold breeze scares the old members of The Sunset Club and their blood too becomes cold.

The linking of various seasons, the growth of nature, and the cyclicity of various months make an abiding appeal in the reader for thinking about the physical time, making him aware about the process of death itself. We here discover the true bond of friendship amidst the three as they reach the final conclusion of their debates and seem to ask: Why we have Gods?

They find themselves in the middle of lives with a consciousness that:

We know that Allah gives us life and Allah takes it back. He rewards those who do good deeds by sending them to paradise and punishes the evil-doers by sending them to burn in hell. (185)

Yet the real question is more solemn: Why God gives us birth and why God takes it back? As

the real question is passed by the discussion comes back to the topic which is the preoccupation of human mind and proclaims the universality of the thought of sex to the extent of an obsession.

The stories/recollections of the Pandit, the Nawab, and the Sardar beautifully evoke the many moods of Delhi in different seasons during different phases of the life of the three characters. Though the plot itself might not be of much attraction to the reader of **The Sunset Club**, it is none the less a telling commentary on a rapid progressing but scarcely developing India as seen through the eyes of the elderly. The book is also a poignant though unabashed celebration of the experiences of being human; of the frailties of old age. Each protagonist is fleshed out with minute and sensitive detailing in terms of their appearance as well as their ideological standpoints. The Pandit with his Brahmanical elitism, the Nawab with his mild demeanour, and the robust and flamboyant Boota Singh keeps the reader both interested and gaping with their naughty stories and vulgar tone.

The sexual encounters recollected by the author herein—irrespective of the fact that they are of either of them—are full of exaggeration and bear in them more an element of lust that can only be seen in a maniac, or a *gigolo* (a playboy), or say a whore. To put the same other way true encounters have more of emotions which are grossly missing in the ones detailed here.

Khushwant Singh opens and ends the story with a note of *Eros* and that of *Thantos*. The middle part has not been deftly woven and counts for the old age and decaying art of the author. The descriptions of seasons though serve to meet some requirements of the story, but bundles with the tales of sexual encounters of the three characters serve merely as fillers. These encounters at on hand can be interpreted in Freudian view point that they contain a great truth of human life, yet they do not contain the bare truth—which being a little far away from that communicated through this novel. These recollections and reflections are more individualistic than universal as most men/women do extramarital sexual relationship for the fulfilment of these carnal desires but not all. It is here where postmodern theories fail to account for a truthful picture of life. V A Shahane claims his writings a persistent search in “quest for identity.” (Shahane: 18) this search gets manifested in *The Sunset Club* too.

Despite this broad outlines of the novel can be analysed in context with the post modern theories along with territories of psychic turmoil in which the protagonist survives. The postmodern theory had two important aspects; confidence in truth; unreal images. (Butler: 110-11) Postmodernist analysis is an attack on authority and reliability—in philosophy, narrative, and the relationship of the arts to truth. This sceptical relationship has a complex relationship with culture. At the same time the felling that mass media substitute images for reality arises in various ways, from the Marxist presupposition that we are all in any case the victims of a false consciousness brought about by bourgeois discourse putting a restraint on free speech.

The title of the novel *The Sunset Club* shows the phrasal usage which can be analysed using two connotations: sunset and club. The first one symbolises the cyclicity of times and the latter becomes social concerns. The club that exists after the process of sunset works out the things that take place not in the light but in the dark. The dark abysmal as the social happenings form the deeper thoughts of human discourse for showing either the social aberrations. In both the cases the novel represents theoretically the skin deep reality of Indian social system, the perversion of human mind, and the transcultural ideologies. The peripheral territories in discussion here get coupled with the organic mode of society. But the society cannot be paralleled with that of George Eliot, for in George Eliot’s fictional world society as an organic mode decides the future of the living being on the earth. In the case of Khushwant Singh society as an organic force doesn’t grow as the physical body of man

grows. However, beyond the territories of metaphoric hunger, passionate height of human mind, and the economic issues therein the novelist surpasses sometimes the physical bonds for going beyond the high norms of the society. The novelist succeeds in portraying the realistic perspectives and *phantasmagoric* vision in relation to the process of being and becoming.

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And so we have the setting of Khushwant Singh's novel. In a thinly-disguised self-portrayal, in a fictional place; Boota has a real-life counterpart. Having met him a number of times at his Sujjan Singh Park flat, New Delhi as well as at his Himalayan home in the hills in Kasauli; 'Sunset Club' may be read as real and fictional literature. 'Sunset Club' explores the inevitable process of aging; the twilight years of three firm friends whose friendship has spanned more than four decades. Their past recollections, their current opinions and their future thoughts all come into play in this touching and tongue-in-cheek narrative.