



THE EGOCENTRIC AND SELF-OBSSESSED WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF KHUSHWANT SINGH

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ABSTRACT

This researcher studies Khushwant Singh's fictional women based on the psychoanalytical concepts and theories proposed by psychoanalysts, like Freud, Jung, Adler, and neo-Freudians etc. The thesis comprises of five chapters. It gives a brief overview of the psychoanalytical theories proposed by prominent psychoanalysts. It also includes biographical details of the author and introduces his fictional works. The egocentric and self-obsessed women, discusses the solipsistic tendencies in women and their reasons for possessing such impulses. It underlines the findings of the study and suggests scope for further researches in the realm of psychoanalysis of literary texts. The premise of the paper is on the psychoanalytical assessment of women in Kushwant Singh's select fictional works. Singh studied, knew, and shared his experiences about women sans restraints and never minced words in giving vent to women's carnal desires. The women's indulgences in the joys of sensual pleasures have been etched scrupulously by him as his fictional world conjures a society in which people cultivate their intimacies essentially guarded and guided by their subjectivity

Keywords: psychoanalytical, independence, assessment of women, carnal desires, society

Khushwant Singh's characterisation is about self and man's obsession with it, and as such it has its metaphysical bias and a permanent relevance. The phenomenon of solipsism resulting from the analysis of psychological and intellectual understanding of the sexual behaviour of his characters carries immense scope for study. Khushwant Singh had the moral courage to be explicit about sex like any other major novelist, fidgeted with an objective vision of life as a whole.

It is evident that Khushwant Singh's leading concern is with the 'self' and not with the sexual mores of his generation. Self is the subject and sex is the means in his fiction. His characters are self-centred, self-tied. They are slaves to the self, and imprisoned in the self, they indulge in sex with all its pervasions. They resort to sex as a means of forgetting their inability to overcome and get across their subjectivity – and cultivate real and sustaining intimacies. Their predicament stems from their egoism which causes the fear of loss of their individuality and hence their refusal to give up their subjectivity.

The ultra-materialism of the contemporary generation with its fervid emphasis on sex has only contributed to the worsening of the crisis of the self. This is the root of the malady Khushwant Singh's characters suffer from. They are transformed into out – of – the way experimenters and try to live a life tossed between their subjectivity and the intimacies they seek, and form them only to let go of them all and be locked up in the self. This becomes their predicament.

Khushwant Singh tries to depict the society in which he has grown and he knows that all those abuses and setbacks that the society suffers from and the jolts and assaults it receives are phenomena that result from a universal consciousness, rooted in human nature. He is an artist and his concern with the men and women he comes to portray is that of an honest artist. He is deeply aware that these men and women are people whose moorings have been cut. He recognizes his role in the exposition of this individual, and he brings to his work a purely intellectual attitude.

Khushwant Singh is wedded to an honest representation of the very actuality and this makes him one of the realists of the recent decades. Among the brilliant writers of his generation, Khushwant Singh, the intellectual artist, fulfils this realistic tradition better than any of his contemporaries. Khushwant Singh in an exclusive interview to *The Sunday Times* of India thus says about the novel:

A novel comes out of an obsession. I was just obsessed with this idea. I heard about a man in a similar situation as I had placed my protagonist. His own daughter told me that after her parents' marriage had broken down, each time he took her out he had a different woman with him. He was going around with all kinds of women. That gave me the idea that instead of being saddled with one person, I should allow my hero to have a succession of women all of whom he would finally discard. (164)

Lachmi in the short story "Karma" represents the typical illiterate Indian woman. In every respect, she presents a foil to her husband, Mohan Lal, an anglophile who denigrates everything Indian not excluding his desi-type wife, Lachmi. While her husband is ashamed of his Indian heritage, she is very much at home in Indian tradition and the Indian way of life. She is in her elements when she gossips carefree with the porter at the railway station. She symbolizes the unsophisticated Indian women who are meek, simple, unassuming unaffected and unruffled. Mohan Lal's aping of the West, directly and indirectly, seems to suggest that the rejection of one's own culture results in the demeaning of the self while Lachmi restrains herself from losing her self-respect, individuality and identity.

In *The Company of Women*, Mohan Kumar, the leading character relates his sensual relationships with other women in his life. He does not confine himself with the norms of the society and seeks the Epicurean philosophy of life. Not tied down by the bonds of marriage, his marriage to Sonu becomes a failure. His wife Sonu, the daughter of a rich businessman is a haughty lady. Mohan's father believes that the match with Achint Ram's

daughter will be a good one, for Sonu is the millionaire's only daughter and will inherit a large share of his wealth and is besides "not bad looking" (CW 135). She has been educated just enough to be married to a good husband. Mohan himself dislikes the family, they are just another of the "upstart Punjabi families." "Pots of money but no class" (CW 136).

Sonu herself clearly has a mind of her own and shows her resentment at having to be inspected. Sonu's feelings in the matter are, however, of no account, to any of the men arranging the match, though Mohan feels that she "undoubtedly looks forward to marriage like all Indian girls of her age do" (CW 138). At the time of engagement she seems to be happy, "as if she had passed the most important exam of her life with flying colours" (CW 142) just to be approved of as a possible wife and daughter-in-law is a woman's most important test for marriage is her only hope, goal and reason for existence.

After marriage, the nervous Sonu repels the advances of her husband which makes him disappointed and feels that she is selfish. On the first night of his marriage Mohan has to satisfy himself by fantasizing about the women with whom he had laid, as Sonu would not agree to share her bed with him. Their honeymoon at the Shivaliks has proved to be a nightmare. "We have been romantically taught to expect more from a honeymoon than it generally offers. A good sexual relationship is almost always the product of mutual understanding and adjustment" (Fromme 91-92).

Sex is one of the primary forces in human nature which finds many indirect expressions other than physical gratification. Though high spirited and convent educated, Sonu is short tempered and possessive. She is accustomed to the ways of her parent's home and finds it difficult to adjust with a self-confident and self-sufficient husband like Mohan Kumar. For him a wife is merely an object who exists only for the purpose of providing the husband the physical pleasure he might demand whenever he wishes. Mohan had to have his way with her only after he has made her a little drunk.

When Sonu falls ill her parents are furious at her husband's lack of consideration and refuse to send her back with him. Only after Mohan threatens to take legal action that Sonu agrees to return to husband, "I took her hand and said, 'Remember, now you belong to me, not to your parents. You go to see them with my permission and come back when I tell you to do so.' I felt it was better to adopt the macho attitude of a Hindu husband" (CW 166). Sonu feels that little understanding was shown to her emotional needs and her husband showed no awareness of keeping a wife happy.

Sonu remains a cultural hybrid immersed in a world of tradition but also desiring the wealth and comforts of the hedonistic society. She wants to play the typical role of a conventional housewife, in charge of household affairs. She feels her territory threatened by the self-reliant and self-confident attitude of her husband. When Mohan buys a large house after his son's birth and gets it done up by "pricey interior decorator" and engages servants for it, as a surprise for his wife and a gift for his son, Sonu is not pleased, "So the staff has also been appointed without consulting the mistress of the house!" remarked Sonu very acidly when we were left alone. 'All I have to do is to eat what is offered to me, sleep with you when I'm expected to and be the wet-nurse for my own child' (CW 174).

Sonu's likes and desires has never been the concern for Mohan Kumar. Her young son reacts to the quarrels by turning to Mohan's father for company. Sonu tries to avenge herself by hurting the one person, whom Mohan has ever loved, his father. She deprives him of the company of his grandson and makes him feel so unwanted in the household that the old man decides to retire to his ashram in Haridwar. Sonu was jealous though shy herself had no love to give him. And she began to resent his father's presence in their home - her home, for it was, after all, a gift from her father. "Will your old man live with us all his life?" she once asked in disgust. He did not like her calling his father 'old man' and told her

so. "I married you, not both of you." She shotback. (CW 5)

Sonu soon turns into the quintessential nagging shrew, from which any husband would be justified in straying. She constantly cross questions him on his past and present affairs and resents the child's fondness for him and for his ayahs. This makes the possessive Sonu more frantic and envious and she "fired one ayah after another on the flimsiest of excuses, she steals my things, she is very lazy, she spoils the child, and so on and so forth" (CW 194). Above all, their sexual relationship becomes a meaningless ritual.

More sessions of sex lead only to a deeper feeling of this mutual strangeness. Just as a gramophone record goes on circling, the needle, treading the track it has fallen into, in order only to reach its soundless end, likewise the music of physical joy between Mohan and Sonu leads to the silence of emotionless coupling. Sessions of love-making on the sly do not take them far and they remain – each a spiritual terra incognita to the other. It is the moment the solipsist in them which has the last laugh.

The marriage finally breaks down when one of its fabricators, Mohan's father dies in Haridwar. It deserves to be pointed out here that being in grief and confusion goes with one who is essentially self-obsessed. The grief-stricken Mohan accuses his wife of having driven the old man away. In the end she can take it no longer. She bursts out angrily at him for treating her like "a piece of dirt", and calls him a "filthy lecher" (CW 208). After having been married for thirteen years and fathering two children, Mohan Kumar feels that he is relieved from the clutches of Sonu. But Sonu's absence makes him feel "empty inside and shrouded in loneliness" (CW 3). Both Sonu and Mohan Kumar respond to the need of the body and any attempt to explore beyond this bodily necessity and to establish a dialogue that might lead to an understanding of hearts is not acceptable to the self. What had brought them together is their sexual curiosity. They cannot help being egotistical, conscious of their condition and need. Mohan is of the view that she is "bitter woman, incapable of happiness and determined to make him unhappy" (CW 6). He prefers divorce to loveless marriage.

They were not meant to be enduring; no strings attached. Great fun while they lasted. He felt they were better than being caught in the vice of one demanding woman who deprived him of the company of others ... It would be a relief for them both to end their marriage ... why the divorce was good for everyone concerned. (CW 7) The heated altercation of mutual accusation brings them quickly to the final confrontation and the dissolution of their relationship. They know that their only reality is that they cannot live together and there is no home they can share and live together. They each have a home – their own subjectivity – and it is time they returned home, their egoistic fortress. The marriage of Sonu was a practical, need-based enterprise, and like the partners in the business, they are on the verge of the expiry of the contract. Sonu feels that it is a return to the self, and an insight into the reality of the self. She has only one desire, casual and sudden for a taste and an experience of the physical joy and they must make a good bargain of it. Hence, she rejects the tendency to take even a step towards such involvement.

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