

Khushwant's *The Sunset Club*: The Live Commentary of Life

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Abstract: The paper examines the art of Khushwant Singh in general and analyzes the merit his latest novel *The Sunset Club*. It examines how Singh employs colourful Panjabi expletives, Urdu couplets, and terms of abuse, in his writings.

Keywords: anecdotal style, autobiography, commentary, episodes

Any critic of Khushwant Singh's fictional art is bound to be written with Oscar Wilde's observations on the philosophy of life in mind that inspired his *Importance of Being Earnest*:

It is exquisitely trivial, a delicate bubble of fancy, and it has its philosophy. That we should treat all the trivial things of life very seriously, and all the serious things of life with serious and studied triviality." ¹

Though using a rather casual and anecdotal style, what he serves in and through his novels is consistently with reference to some of the persistently serious issues and concerns affecting individuals, communities and countries. Writing in an essentially journalistic style, he obviously writes to be read, understood and enjoyed. Khushwant Singh, a vibrant and brilliant writer writing with unfatigued stamina even in the last phase of life with so much glitter and glister that the young generation of writers are impressed and demitted. Even at the age of 97 his mind is still active and there is no sign of fagging in his writings. One of the icons and representatives of Indian literary fraternity with a cosmopolitan world view, he is a man for whom one may have either aversion and aversion or appreciation and affection. Singh is a man and a writer who lives out Buffon's dictum of "*Le style cest l'homme*. Style indeed is the man. As a writer his biggest attribute is that he writes what he feels. His style is totally different from that of others. He employs colourful Panjabi expletives, Urdu couplets, and terms of abuse, in his writings. It would not be in exaggeration to say that Singh's name in the history of Indian English writing has evolved as one of the finest novelists, historians, political commentators and prominent, excellent society observers and a social critic. About his writing it is worth quoting what he himself so candidly confessed in his book *Absolute Khushwant*: "Nobody has invented a condom for the pen" (KS, AK, p. 28). We find all the qualities mentioned above about his writings in his latest novel, *The Sunset Club* which came out in 2010. As the subtitle of the novel suggests, the narrative, is patently anecdotal, a collection of episodes during the year 2009. Khushwant Singh's fictional art is so deeply marked by verisimilitude that it becomes difficult to tell whether he is recording actual facts or serving stories in the garb of history. *The Sunset Club* which is a record of the dead friends of the writers about whom he talked so

much. He has mixed facts with fantasy in the novel. So it is not less than an autobiography of the novelist. In the thirteen brief sections of the novel he tells us about his life and the life of his friends. Going through the novel, the reader gets a feeling that he is reading the columns contributed by the writer to newspapers. It probably is a mark of a good work of fiction that it should not read like a fiction but an authentic record of events and incidents of real life. *The Sunset Club* is a veritable bouillabaisse of variety of views represented by the central characters of the novel. The members of the sunset club are three friends for over forty years, Pandit Pritam Sharma, Nawab Barkatullah Baig and Sardar Boota Singh. Every evening at the sunset hour they meet together on the Boodha Binch of Lodhi Gardens to exchange news and views and events of the day about everything: love, sex, religion, condition of the country and so on. The story travels from 26th of January 2009 and ends on the 26th of January 2010 with the lives of three gentlemen members of the sunset club. Singh through his characters portrays the continuities of life very piquantly. With the change of seasons there is no change in their habits. The novel that could very well have turned out to be his swan-song (which thankfully has not yet been the case) for its sequel came in the form of *Agnostic Khushwant There is No God*. It is significant that Khushwant has carved out a slice of time and invested it with the essence of the ever-moving, never-stopping wheel of time, of eternity. Does the cycle have a beginning or an end? What is ostensibly the end turns out to be the beginning of a new cycle. The plot of the story is at once linear and cyclical. What happens in time goes on to interface with eternity. It is significant that the setting of the story is Delhi — the eternal city of India. It is of further significance that the nodal point of the story — the still centre of the turning wheel is Lodhi Gardens in Old Delhi. It has been a silent witness to generations that have come and gone but it continues. Written by a nonagenarian, it is not just a matter of co-incidence that the story starts in winter and also ends in winter the wheel turning a full circle. If winter comes can spring be far behind? The second chapter is dedicated to the advent of spring the harbinger of new life. It is February Delhi's flower month. But a good story is at once located and ubiquitous. *The Sunset Club* is not only the story of three octogenarians and about ageless city of Delhi. In the ultimate analysis, it is about everyone and everywhere. The spirit of time is ever-going, the indomitable spirit of life in the three old man is diehard. So spring comes for the old just as it comes for the young. If reality recedes for them, memories keep coming back and are ever fresh. The old men plod on with life though always conscious of the chasing chariot of time running behind them. As Boota says, "Bhai Sahib, all of us are getting on in years. We have to prepare ourselves for the day the *Mehfil* will be over" (KS, SC p. 58). Though they recapitulate life, they do not capitulate to it. Orchestrating with Boota, Baig adds, "But we must keep meeting as long as we can. *Jab tak Chaalee Chaley*. (p. 59) And Khushwant brings the chapter to a close by making Baig Quote Bahadur Shah Zafar's couplet: I asked for a long life | Only four days were granted: | Two went in hoping | Two lost in waiting. (p. 59) As the three old men continue to frequent Lodhi Garden, February turns into March and after spring summer knocks at the door. As the novelist

observes in the opening of the third chapter, "In March, death and rebirth go hand in hand. It is the time of *Patjhar* (falling leaves) and new ones taking their place (p. 60). What Eliot says about this time of year counterpoints very well with the way Khushwant Singh looks at it all. March runs on to April and life moves on as much for the old as for the young. The three friends reminisce over their respective pasts with all their fun and frolic and get on with the business of living, entirely oblivious to the imminence of death. Applying a soothing balm on their hurt feelings caused by clash of opinions and convictions, Sharma jee says, *Chalo ji, let bygones be bygones.* (p. 100) Delhi moves from April to May. May of the laburnums. May in Delhi is memorable because of the flowering of the laburnums, when no other plant flowers, the laburnums do. The spirit of the three old friends is like the laburnums. They are on fire (of colours) when the world around them is also on fire (the fire of the heat of summer). Against the background of the changing season the three friends go on with their confabulations on issues of contemporary as well as historical significance of time, present and of time past. Next comes the month of scorcher, but the summer heat cannot with the spirit of the three old men. They go on meeting regularly at Lodhi Garden and enjoying themselves in each other's company. After the scorching heat of May and June comes July bringing along the monsoon clouds to cover the sky of Delhi. It brings relief after all the dry discomfort of deep summer. As the author so piquantly points out the stormy moisture-laden winds shake trees and send their branches swirling like dancing dervishes. There is lightning, thunder and rain (p. 125). It is a season when the cry of the peacock may be heard. As in the other chapters, in this chapter also the undertone of sex keeps throbbing. It is in this chapter that Boota wheedles some of the sex secrets out of Baig. He confesses to Boota his encounter with his *Mausi*, which resulted in her conceiving after eight years of marriage. He sired a son at the age of fourteen. Khushwant Singh reveals here his uncanny capacity for seasoning the serious with the erotic. This undeniably makes for the readability of the novel. Though the month of 15th August, Khushwant Singh seems to find nothing to celebrate in August. The season has precious little to offer for celebration. As the author observes, "The rainy season is at its height in August. The skies are overcast and there is a shower or two every other day. At times it rains continuously for three or four days" (p. 137). As the change of atmosphere affects nature, it also affects humans — among them Boota Singh, for whom "Every change of season brings on sneezing, sore throat, running nose, cough and phlegm (p. 139). Ultimately Boota overcomes his illness and life goes on as before. Then summer merges with autumn, August turns into September. There is heavy downpour for two days and the visits to Lodhi Garden are disturbed. But the discussions of past and present on science and religion continue when they meet again. Among many things discussed, Norman Borlaug is also discussed. The discussion was triggered off by the death of the great man, winner of the Nobel Prize and father of the Green Revolution who died at the age of 95. Sharma points out his greatness to Baig when he says, One of the greatest men who trod the face of the earth (p. 150). Boota address to it, Mian Sahib, if there was no Borlaug most of us would have starved to death (p. 150). The chapter

closes with Boota obviously voicing the views of the author, I would put a blanket ban on misuse of public places for religious purposes, but people have great respect for bogus religiosity. (p. 152) The tenth chapter is entitled Gandhi's October. It begins with the sentence, "The two nicest months to be in Delhi are February and October" (p. 153). October came and "the Summer's heat and the dampness caused by monsoon rains evaporate. The skies are a cloudless blue, the sun no longer scorches and pleasant autumn breezes blow" (p. 153). The chapter reveals Khushwant Singh's insatiable capacity to absorb the beauty and beatitude of life. But he not contend with just referring to the sensational qualities of October but also its significance as the month in which Gandhiji was born about whom Sharma says, "he was the greatest of the great who trod the face of the earth" (p. 155). But if Sharma comments on his greatness, Boota points out some of the quirks in the character of the great man, "He had women to massage him. He had young girls sleep stark naked on the floor on either side of him, he gave enemas to them, bathed naked with them, Just to make sure he did not get dirty thoughts and erections. Then he had wet dreams and told everyone about them (p. 157). The chapter closes with references to the festivals that mark the month of October. For instance, there is reference to Diwali. This is marked by eating, gambling and bursting crackers. November follows and with it follows Guru's birth anniversary after Diwali. As Boota celebrates his guru's birth anniversary, there is a lot of discussion on Sikh religion. Though pretending to be an agnostic and rationalist, Boota like Khushwant Singh has great respect and admiration for Sikh the religion and culture. Boota tells his friends about the similarities between Sikhism and Islam. Then there is a spirited discussion on different religions among the three friends. Sharma points out the similarities between Judaism and Islam and says, "most of its practices are borrowed from Judaism.... Jews bleed the animals and birds they eat and call it *kosher*. Muslims do the same and call it *halal*. Jews consider pigs unclean and do not eat pork or bacon. Muslims also consider the pig unclean and believe its meat is *haram* forbidden. Jews circumcise male children; so do Muslims and call it *Sunnat* tradition. (pp. 166-67). As autumn gives way to winter, Baig reminds his friends of what emperor Babur once said "Enjoy life to full because you have only one life to live : *Babur ba aish kosh, kay zindagi do baara n'est*. (p. 172)

End of the year 2009 brings the story, too, to the threshold of the door leading from life out to death. Cold does not only kill nature, it also kills humans. As the author points out, "More old people die in December and January than in other months of the year" (p. 173). The age of the year now matches the age of the protagonists. Cold and rain affect their lives also. Everything slows down, but the wheel goes on turning. As the French saying goes, the more it changes the more it is the same thing. There is talk of life; there is talk of death as the year is dying. Baig in a conversation with his wife comments on the mysteries of life and death by quoting a couplet: All we know about life is about its middle We know not its beginning; we know not its end. (p. 185) The believer looks at life and death in one way; the agnostic in another way. But the mystery remains the same all the same. But Khushwant cannot be expected to remain

serious all the time. Joie de vivre so strong in him that even in the face of death he cannot but celebrate life. There is nothing under the sun that is untouched by his pen. In cold December he writes of hot harlots. He is indeed a "*Rangeela Sardar*" as Begum Sakina describes him. The year draws to an end and the three friends cast a longing lingering look behind as the year came and went away so fast. As Baig exclaims, "Ya Allah, how quickly the year has gone by. It seems as if last New Year's Eve was just yesterday. Much happened in 2009. We should ponder over that" (p. 197). Pathos is not quite the thing to look for in Khushwant, yet it is unmistakably there in such moments. As the year is passing, Boota strikes the Keynote in the words of Walter Savage Landor: I strove with none; for none was worth my strife; | Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art; | I warmed both hands before the fire of life; | It sinks, and I am ready to depart. (p.210) At last the sunset hour comes for the Sunset Club. 2009 rolls into 2010. January can be indeed a cruel month for Delhi-ites. The mornings are bitterly cold and foggy; and the pale sun takes so long to warm the chill out of one's bones. 2010 seer the sun set over the lives of Boota's two friends. The first to go is Baig on the 3rd of January. Sharma follows on the 15th of the same month — the club is broken; Boota is left alone, all, all, alone. Though Boota knows the next to go inevitably would be he, his vitality is irrepressible. After dismissing death, he returns to gazing at the Bara Gumbad. It does resemble "the fully rounded bosom of a young woman" (p. 216). It is *Tamaam Shud* for the novel but not for the novelist yet. The novel is typical in style, no doubt, poignant and profound and deeply explores friendship, old-age days of three old gentlemen and their thoughts, sexuality, infirmity, and presents an insightful portrayal of nature and the changing seasons of Delhi. Khushwant has portrayed all such things which are part and parcel of human life and human character. He writes about love, sex, present political situation, religion, gods and goddess and what not. It is indeed also a commentary covering a year in the life of India. It amounts to a review of the raw experiences of life by the ripe and mellow twilight of the autumn of life.

Endnotes:

1. Mr. Oscar Wilde on Mrs. Oscar Wilde, *St. Jame's Gazette*, 18 Jan. 1895, pp. 4-5. Quoted in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. p. 16.

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