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SOCIAL REALISM IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S NOVEL,
THE COMPANY OF WOMEN

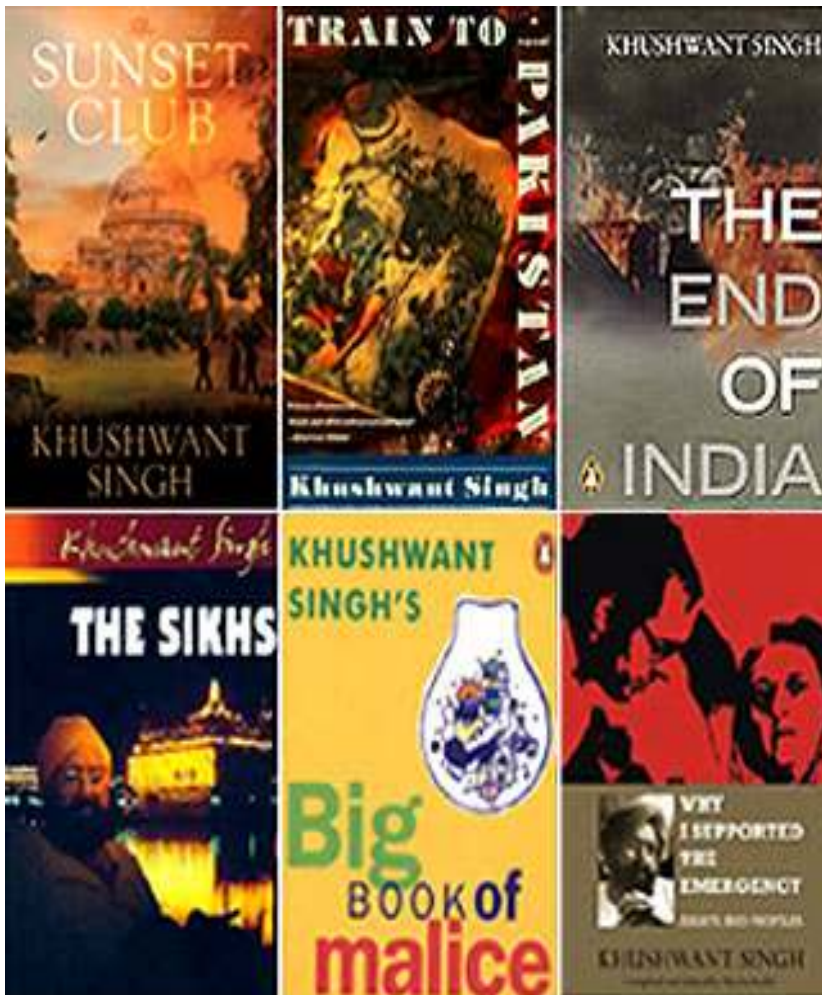


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Short Profile

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Books by Khushwant Singh

ABSTRACT:

Social Realism took a new turn in the twentieth century. The term “Social realism” has been extended to signify the reality of one’s psyche and inner self. It does not mean only external reality but inner landscape of one’s mind. It means a reaction against a number of things that were thought in the mid 19th century to be unreal - Gothic romance, picaresque, adventure, allegorical fantasy, classic composure, conservative morality. As an aesthetic form, social realism comes into view not only for literary but for political art in the exhibition of 1855 by Courbet. Flaubert’s theory of social realism is concerned with the professional procedures of a novelist, conceived with a scientific detachment, a coolness and care, in the observation.

KEYWORDS

Social Realism , Khushwant Singh's Novel , allegorical fantasy, classic composure,.

INTRODUCTION

Ian Watt observes: "Modern realism begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses. It has its origins in Descartes and Locke and received its first full formulation by Thomas Reid in the middle of the eighteenth century" (12) Realistic art does not simply depict recognizable people and objects from nature. It reveals both the individuality of human beings and their similarity to masses of other human beings, who, for all their widely different appearance and background, lead similar lives and face the same problem. Realistic art awakens people to the beauty of nature and also to the beauty of human beings. Social Realism is not a new phenomenon and its history can be traced all the way back through writers like Aristotle. Some insight into the connection between modern realism, classical realism and Romanticism might be enabled by looking at their philosophical underpinning.

The Company of Women is Khushwant Singh's fourth novel published in 1999. The novel deals with the life of modern people in the metropolitan city like Delhi in the twentieth century. This novel reveals the secret life of modern man as it is. The novel achieved its name in the list of most read and most sold novels in India, as is evident from the top ten fiction list published by 'The Hindustan Times.' In a review, learned critic, Hasan Suroor regards the novel as "voyeuristic view of male and female anatomy and titillating accounts of the innumerable sexual encounters of his protagonist" (19). The novel has evoked controversial response in literary circles.

The novel has been depreciatively categorized as a 'popular novel,' pulp novel or 'pornographic novel' by some learned reviewers. The novel reveals innumerable sexual encounters in a live manner. The popular novelist Shobha De also condemns the novel for its theme and says: "I may write something for strangers in future. And no, I'll definitely not write The Company of Women; it gives sex a bad name. My fantasy happens to be more imaginative. Khushwant Singh never have written the book. It was like a SAARC Conference on bedding your neighbors. It also exposed him as India's most non-erotic writer and reconfirmed what a few have always believed sex, in Khushwant's case, has always been in his head." (21) Though the novel is highly criticized and blamed by in any learned interviewers and people, no one can deny its importance from the view of social realism. The novel is brimmed with all sort of modern realities of the contemporary society.

The Company of Women deals with the luxurious life of modern man and simultaneously attacks the weaknesses and follies in Indian society. He deals with weaknesses of marriage system in which dowry has more importance. He reveals family relationships, marital relationship politics, and the middle class aspirations for money in the novel. It also deals with the problems of the untouchables, caste system, religion, life of political men and women in the modern society, dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan, conversion, problems in a joint family, concept of sin, criticism about Indian news papers, money minded nature of religious priests at temple places, luxurious life of rich people in metropolitan cities like Delhi, sexual exploitation of girls and boys, ghastly effects of lust, effects of unsafe sex in hotels and use of Indian English language, hazardous effects of lust or sex in men's life.

In an Indian society, marriages are the most important event in the life of a human being. An unmarried person has a lower rank in the ladder of social status. Marriage is a duty (Dharma). It is a father's duty to find a husband for his daughter and a wife for his son. Marriage is a traditional institution in which a man and woman are bound together by Dharma that is Duty. Dharma asks them realize to be dutiful towards each other. Fate of the women within the framework which ultimately becomes a routine. Love is a binding force, but usually there is no love in marriage.

Khushwant Singh criticizes the arranged marriage system in the novel; "The novel also parodies middle class aspiration the concept of arranged marriages in India which are often akin to business

bargains and the desire for scandalous gossip of the urban elite, through the introspection of his protagonist Mohan Kumar, the author cleverly parodies the concept of arranged marriage." (TCOW, 223) Problem of dowry in the arranged marriage system gives rise to mismatched marriages. In the novel Khushwant Singh has focused on the dowry based marriage between Mohan Kumar and Sonu Mohan's father's expectation of getting huge dowry in Mohan's marriage makes him decide to publish an advertisement in the matrimonial columns of the news papers Hindustan Times and The Times of India.

When the interested parties arrive with the relatives father interviews them like the chairman of the Public Service Commission. When Mohan asks his father, "Papa, what is all this? You should at least have asked me about it? Why? he replied truculently. It is father's duty to see his son married in his life time I am only fulfilling my dharma. If your mother had been alive, she would have been helping me. Now I have to do it alone" (TCOW, 125 - 126). Getting a son or daughter married is the last of householder's familiar obligations before he enters the final phase of life, that of sanyas. Khushwant Singh attacks the Indian parents who impose their choices and ideas upon their children and don't care about their children's choices and feelings. In the arranged marriage system, feelings, temperaments have no values. It values money and education only. The marriage based on dowry can take place between two different temperaments and such marriages destroy the place of conjugal life.

There is a keen competition among the rich people to spend money on marriage ceremonies. Marriage is a symbol of social status in all social strata. Novy Kapadia comments; "Khushwant Singh is at his satirical best. The over - protectiveness of Mohan Kumar's father, the lack of finesse in the marriage advertisement, the girls of marriageable age on display and crass vulgarity of the nouveau - rich are all scathingly exposed"(223) Khushwant Singh puts forth social realism in the novel by criticizing untouchability and caste system which is a stigma on the human life in India. Khushwant Singh criticizes the act of the so called cultured people that they prohibit the untouchables from entering in the house but the same untouchable women become touchable when their sexual urge becomes strong for them. In the novel, Dhanno is the representative of the untouchable working women who work among the elite. Two servants in Mohan's house deny her entry in the kitchen.

Through the relationship of Dhanno and Mohan Kumar, Khushant Singh has exposed the master servant liaison in the metropolitan cities like Delhi. Khushwant Singh explains: "To them she was an untouchable: they never let her enter the kitchen. They avoided physical contact with her, and when she came to get the leftovers, they dropped daal-roti or whatever had not been eaten by their master into utensils, she brought with her"(TCOW, 21). Khushwant Singh attacks rich people's partial treatment towards the untouchables. The caste based and religion based social exploitation has its motivating factors, its accessories and its effects. The motivating factors are greed, lust, and desire for superior status. The accessories are physical torture and hypocrisy and exploited people's acceptance of their lot. The effect consists of the revolt of the suppressed castes against the higher castes. Untouchables in the novels of Khushwant Singh are submissive.

Khushwant Singh puts forward social realism through the aspect of religion. His novels involve a study of a Sikh religion. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Sikh religion, he read all about the religions in the world. In the novel, Dr. Ashby is a professor of religion in Princeton University in America. Through the classes in comparative religion in the Department of Religion and Philosophy he teaches all religions and compels students to debate upon the good ideas and backwards of the religion. Groups of students in the class are from different countries and religions. They are students of different faculties. It includes medicine, literature, engineering and others. After each lecture there are discussions on religions Through Dr. Ashby, Khushwant Singh focused on major religious: Zoroastrian in. Jainism, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

Khushwant Singh criticizes the Hindus who don't know the names of god and goddesses who are

revered Hindu mythology. Very few know the Gayatri Mantra which has great value in the Hindu religion. Many Hindus have not read the religious books. Like the four Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagwat Gita. Hinduism preaches: "Read what moves you most and seek the truth within yourself" The Gita's message is spiritually elevating. Professor Ashby explained it. "Nishkama Karma do your duty without expectation of reward." (TCOW, 98) Hinduism teaches that when you engage in the battle of life, do so regardless of whether you win or lose. There is the lord's promise to come again and again to redeem the world from sin and evil doing.

Khushwant Singh has dealt with another important aspect in the novel which is conversion and dispute between two religions and dispute over Jammu and Kashmir between India and Pakistan : He refers to Indo - Pak War: "Islam spread like wildfire from the Pacific coast to the Atlantic, coast of Europe, it spread all over Asia and the African continent. It overcame the opposition of fire worshippers Jews, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus. Why does Islam gain more converts than any other religion?" (TCOW, 104). One of the Jew students says that Islam borrowed most of its ideas from Judaism and the greeting in the Islam. 'Salaam Valikum is derived from the Hebrew' Shalom alech and the names of their five daily prayers are taken from Judaism. In Islam the concept of haraam (unlawful) and halaal (legitimate), what to eat and what not to eat, is taken from the Jewish kosher. Islam is the mixture of Judaism or Christianity. Yasmeen is a Hindu converted Muslim character in the novel. Her for fathers, Brahmin Pandits were converted in to Islam. She is of the opinion that Islam is the greatest religion in the world.

The issue of Jammu and Kashmir is also discussed in the novel. Pakistan wants the liberation of Kashmir which is in the custody of India and Indians want Azad Kashmir which is in the custody of Pakistan. The conversation between. Yasmeen and Mohan Kumar shows the feelings of Pakistanis and India and about Jammu and Kashmir she says: "We may not have succeeded yet, but one day we will liberate Kashmir from Indian's clutches and I will return to Srinagar which I have seen in pictures." (TCOW, 101). In reply Mohan Kumar say; "One day we will liberate your so called Azad Kashmir from the clutches of Pakistan and make it a part of Indian Kashmir again" (TCOW, 101)

In the novel, The Company of Women, Khushwant Singh depicts the life of men and women in politics. Yasmeen Nanchoo is the woman political leader from the Azad Kashmir. She is a member of the Pakistani Assembly. People in politics are always surrounded by men and women with petitions. Yasmeen's life is full of boredom. So she is eager to have a sex with Mohan who is twenty years younger to her.

In the novel, Khushwant Singh has dealt with the sexual exploitation of girls and boys during their childhood in the modern society. He is aware of the social evils, oddities and eccentricities of society. He ironically explains that boys and girls are being exploited by their close relatives in the sound social norms and parents of the victim are always unaware about it. To present this fact his two characters Molly Gomes and Susanthika reveal their experiences of exploitation by their relatives and Mary Joseph by the Parade. Molly confesses that she was sexually exploited by her uncle - Susanthika was exploited by her married uncle who was a father of fourteen years boy.

Khushwant Singh criticizes men's expectation of women's virginity. At the time of proposal of marriage men inquire about the virginity of women but women never inquire about men's virginity. When Sonu reads matrimonial columns with expectation of girl's virginity she asks Mohan, "..... all men want fair skinned brides and virgins. All virgins are maidens; not all maidens are virgins; she would explain no girl seeking a husband asks for a boy who has never slept with a woman" (TCOW, 27) Khushwant Singh highlights the deception of girls in India whose husbands are abroad for jobs. Khushwant Singh criticizes the repression of sex in society. Man is an animal but he is different from other animals only because he has power of thinking. When his sex instinct is surpassed, it breaks his thinking power and he behaves like brute So Khushwant Singh expects sexual gratification on the

primary basis.

Thus to conclude, *The Company of Women* is a novel about social realism. Khushwant Singh puts forward the social realism through the aspects such, as child marriages, love, sex, politics, religion, Jammu and Kashmir issue. Indo - Pak war, the repression of sex in Society. He wants to warn to control on lust because lust diverts us from achieving our aim in life. Social realism is a work of art which in explaining a truth, may emphasize the ugly or sordid. It is a creative process in art.

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