

The Sunset Club: A Journey of Ageing

Paper Submission: 14/08/2021, Date of Acceptance: 23/08/2021, Date of Publication: 24/08/2021

Abstract

The present research paper is about the three octogenarians- Mr. Preetam Sharma(Hindu), Mr. Boota Singh (Sikh) and Nawab Barkatullah Baig Dehlavi (Muslim). These three friends used to meet daily at Lodhi garden and discuss the contemporary issues of our nation. The topics of their discussion are religion, politics and sex. Apart from these topics they also talk about their old age. Through their conversation we come to know about the life of old age and the problems associated with it. The story covers the period of one year. It starts from 26th January 2009 to 26th January 2010. As the year 2010 approaches Mr. Barkatullah and Mr. Preetam Sharma dies and Mr. Boota Singh remains alive. After the death of his friends Boota Singh feels alone and starts counting his own days. The story ends with the loneliness of Mr. Boota Singh.

Keywords: Old Age, Loneliness, Frustration

Introduction

The novel *The Sunset Club* is written by Khushwant Singh. When he wrote this novel, he was 95 years old age. An age when most of the people wait for death, lose all the zeal of life. But Khushwant Singh, who was a jovial person all through his life wrote his last novel which was published in 2010. This novel though talks about old age and about the problems related with old age. But it is not depressing and boring. Khushwant Singh as usual has given it an attractive shape. Through the description of the youth of the octogenarians. Khushwant Singh talks about sex and love also which makes the novel readable to all generations.

The novel is partially autobiographical as the protagonist, Mr. Buta Singh resembles Khushwant Singh in real life. Khushwant Singh wrote this novel on the suggestion of Sheela Reddy. In the Apologia he writes:

I had no intention of writing this novel. I had turned ninety-five and was not sure I would be able to finish it. Having nothing to do I became restless. Then Sheela Reddy of Outlook magazine suggested I record memories of my dead friends about whom I talked so much.

The idea germinated and I got down to doing sol mixed facts with fantasy.¹

In the novel *The Sunset Club* we have three major characters – a Hindu, a Sikh and a Muslim. They are friends for last forty years. The eldest one is Mr. Preetam Sharma, a Punjabi Brahmin, an Oxford graduate who served as cultural counselor in London and Paris and rose to the highest position in the Ministry of Education before he retired. He lives with his spinster sister Sunita, who works with an N.G.O. The second member is Nawab Barkatullah Baig Dehlavi, a Pathan whose ancestors settled in Delhi when the British took over the country. The third member is Mr. Boota Singh, 86 years old Sikh. He suffers from the chronic constipation, diabetes and fluctuating blood pressure, enlarged prostate and periodic bouts of gout. He professes to be an agnostic but he prays daily for his health. He loves Urdu poetry. He is a widower with two children. His son has settled in Canada and his daughter is a widow who lives with him. Mr. Sharma and Boota Singh knew each other from Lahore. Baig did not know them but gradually they became friends.

All the three friends were above eighty in their age. They had spent a long life so they had knowledge and experiences of every field. They used to come to Lodhi Garden daily for walk and in this way, they meet daily in the evening and spend their time in discussing various topics like religion, politics, sex and love. The projection of three characters is very real. We often see old people around us discussing various topics. As in old age people have ample time but no energy left so they love to talk with their friends. Their children and grandchildren are busy in their mundane life and find little time to talk to the old people of their house.

The three friends not only discuss serious topic but sometimes very interesting topics too. Mr. Boota Singh shares his love life with Mr. Baig and Baig with Mr. Boota. Mr. Sharma though is a learned person has little knowledge about women. He had known only one woman in his life, Lakshmi. Mr. Boota



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and Mr. Baig generally share their sexual encounters in the absence of Mr. Sharma. Mr. Baig feels closer to Mr. Boota Singh because Mr. Boota is a Sikh and talks against Hinduism. Mr. Sharma is a staunch Hindu and he likes BJP. Mr. Baig and his wife hates BJP as they held the party responsible for the demolition of Babri mosque. Mr. Sharma explains to Mr. Baig the cause of the demolition of Babri mosque and Mr. Baig understands that as the feeling of Muslims is hurt at the destruction of mosque the same must have felt by the Hindus. They have taken revenge of construction of Babri mosque on the birth place of Lord Ram and have never demolished any other mosques of our country.

Khushwant Singh in this novel describes the physical ailments associated with old age. While introducing Boota Singh he writes:

He suffers from many ailments; chronic constipation incipient diabetes-fluctuating blood pressure, prostate and periodic bouts of gout.²

Indigestion is also a common problem of old people. That is the reason why old people ignore spicy food. Mr. Sharma does not like boiled food but is forced to eat it. The boiled and simple food also adds to their boring life. Food plays an important role in our life. And eating simple and boiled food all the time brings frustration in old people. Mr. Boota never compromises with his food and suffers later with many ailments related to indigestion. He used to take laxatives, enemas to clear his bowels. He is jealous of Mr. Baig that despite having rich food he never complained of indigestion. Even the dreams of old people change with age. When Boota Singh was young he dreams of young girls but at his old age he often dreams that he is not able to find a private place to defecate. This seems funny but this is the stark reality of old age. Lack of sleep is also other problem of old age. Mr. Boota suffers from insomnia. He often wakes up at midnight and becomes restless.

He is up before 3am and relaxes in his armchair, hoping to doze off for an hour or so. No luck.³

And when he is not able to sleep again, he goes for the morning walk. When we are young, we never think of death as it is assumed that death comes at old age. It is not real but generally people die at old age. At young age people make future plans for their life but at old age people wait for their death. One day Mr. Boota did not go to Lodhi Garden and Mr. Baig became restless. The next day when Mr. Baig says that he felt depressed in the absence of Mr. Boota then he says:

Baig sahib, all of us are getting on in years. We have to prepare ourselves for the day the *mehfil* be over.⁴

We all know that human life is mortal but this realization comes at the last stage of our life. In our old age we do not have any responsibilities to perform. Old people feel their life to be useless and worthless. They feel lonely. This Loneliness is best

described by Khushwant Singh from the mouth of Boota Singh. Boota's son comes to Delhi annually to meet his father. Mr. Boota feels happy on his son's visit but his son is busy with his own friends and club. Mr. Boota says:

He spends his afternoon playing golf, and evening catching up with his pals. He is rarely back before 2am, and gets up around 10am. Once in a while he joins his father at lunch. When they exchange a few words.⁵

The statement of Boota shows that his son visits his father just to perform his duty. He was not interested to spend time with his old father. He feels happy with his friends rather than with his father. He never tries to understand his father's emotions and his loneliness. This ignorance by his son gives pain to Boota.

In young age generally a person is engaged in worldly happiness. He never thinks of morality or immorality. But as soon as he/she grows old he/she thinks of ethical codes. They try to hide their past affairs with their children or grandchildren as the revelation may bring shame to them. Mr. Baig has also a guilt which he shares with Mr. Boota. Mr. Baig reveals his black secret that, he had physical relationship with his aunt when he was merely fourteen years old. The relationship also bore a baby boy. But now he feels all these actions immoral.

The story of the novel starts from 26th January 2009 and ends with 26th January 2010. Khushwant Singh describes the attitude of old people towards new year celebration. They become indifferent towards new year because for them it is just one more year added to their life. But this did not happen always. When Boota was young, he used to celebrate New year till midnight. But now the same Boota is in bed with his hot water bottle.

At midnight he is woken up by the bursting of crackers.

And boys shouting on the streets. He knows 2009 is dead,

2010 has been born. He falls asleep.⁶

The new year did not bring good news to Mr. Boota's life. On 3rd January Mr. Baig dies while sleeping. On 10th January Mr. Sharma fell down on the pavement and had a fracture. He is operated but recovers in few days and was discharged from the hospital. On 15th January Mr. Boota receives the news of Mr. Sharma's death. On hearing the news he feels his heart broken and says:

He must come to terms with the realities of life-death.

Both Baig and Sharma had good innings and lived longer than most Indians do. He is much the same age. His turn will come soon. When? No one knows.⁷

When at old age, someone dear and of his age dies, the old person starts counting his own days on this earth. Mr. Boota opened his telephone diary and crossed the names of Baig Barkatullah and Sharma, Preetam and wrote their death dates. And added before his name Date, Month, Year. This passage is pathetic and beautifully describes the

emotions of an old man. When Khushwant Singh, wrote this novel, he was an old man and thus he was able to understand and feel the pain of old age. It was 26th January 2010, Mr. Boota tries to cheer himself and so he watched the Republic Day parade on the television. After watching it he goes to Lodhi garden. The bench that is known as Boora binch brought back the memories of his dead friends he feels a sharp pain in his heart. When the gardener asks Mr. Boota the cause of his absence since last days, he tells him about the death of his friends. The gardener feels sorry for the death Mr. Boota says:

Bhai, who knows the way of God? ⁸

He starts gazing the bara gumbad that still resembles the bosom of a young girl. The time span of the novel is one year. The novel though talks of old age but the reminiscences of youth bring energy in the three friends. The novel talks about various topics like politics, religion, sex. The three old friends belong to elite class. Through these three characters we come to know about the contemporary social, economic and political India. It also depicts the views of the Muslims and the Sikhs against the Hindus and vice versa.

Aim of The Study

The aim of the study is to attract the attention of the readers towards the contemporary issues of the society .It also compel the people to think over the old generation who wishes love and attention of their loved ones towards them

Conclusion

Khushwant Singh was a social critic and a minute observer. He had written about many social issues. And in this novel also he discusses one of the major social problems of modern India. Today the joint family has almost disappeared. The young generation moves from his\her native place to earn their livelihood and parents are left behind. When one of the partners dies the situation becomes grim. The children do not have time to spend with them and this gradually brings the old people into depression. In the old age one's body becomes

weak and he\she needs support. They not only become physically weak but also emotional. They want to share their views and past experiences with their family and when they do not find the same, they feel lonely.

Just as Khushwant Singh had discussed other issues perfectly in the same way, this novel also fulfills the aim of the writer. Khushwant Singh through this novel, wanted his readers to ponder over this subject and I hope that the beautiful depiction of old age, no doubt forces the readers to think over it and this is the success of Khushwant Singh.

References

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4. *Ibid., p.58.*
5. *Ibid., p.82.*
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8. *Ibid., p.216*