



## PORTRAYAL OF CONVENTIONAL AND INDIVIDUALISTIC WOMEN IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S SHORT STORIES, 'LIFE'S HOROSCOPE' AND 'PARADISE'

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### ABSTRACT

*Khushwant Singh is a famous Indo-Anglian novelist and short story writer in the contemporary period. He has to his credit varied achievements as a translator, novelist, historian, short story writer, essayist, and columnist. He has published six novels, Train to Pakistan, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, Delhi, In the Company of Women, Sunset Club & Burial at Sea. Singh is basically a short story writer. He has published Four collections of short stories. Singh concentrates excessively on women characters in his short stories, novels and essays. The present paper highlights conventional and individualistic women in the short stories, 'Paradise' and 'Life's Horoscope'. Singh in his fiction on the one hand presents women as the obedient, docile, religious and conventional characters and on the other Singh presents women as individual independent, and liberal who do not follow the traditional conventions and follow the liberal methods.*

### INTRODUCTION

Khushwant Singh is a famous Indo-Anglian novelist and a short story writer in the contemporary period. He has to his credit varied achievements as a translator, novelist, historian, short story writer, essayist, and columnist. He has published six novels, Train to Pakistan, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, Delhi, In the Company of Women, Sunset Club & Burial at Sea. Singh is basically a short story writer. He has published Four collections of short stories. He concentrates excessively on women characters in his short stories, novels

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and essays. The present paper highlights conventional women in the short stories, 'Paradise' and 'Life's Horoscope'.

Khushwant Singh in his fiction on the one hand presents women as the obedient, docile, religious and conventional characters and on the other Singh presents women as individual independent, and liberal who do not follow the traditional conventions and follow the liberal methods. The conventional women possess deep respect and reverence for their religions and rituals like the classical heroines, Sita of *Ramayana* and Kunti and Draupadi of *Mahabharata*. Like the conventional women, Anasuya and Savitri they symbolize deep spirituality and traditional idealness.

First of all motherhood and love for their children and reverence to the tradition is the most important feature of the conventional women. In the short story 'Life's Horoscope', Parvathi Joshi is portrayed as a loving mother towards her son. Madan Mohan. As a concerned mother when her son is not able to find a suitable job she comes to his rescue and comforts him. When he is not a responsible son she advises her husband what actually can be done to make him active. She says: "He needs a stabilizing influence in his life, Parvati ventured. Perhaps a good, understanding wife will make him more responsible." (Life's Horoscope' p. 43). Like every mother she has a very elevated opinion about her son. When her husband says who would give his child to an unemployed teacher, she responds immediately and says: "what do you mean by unemployed teacher? Parvati retorted angrily. He is an outstanding scholar, the likes of which the country does not have." (Life's Horoscope' p. 43). She is a mother who is worried about her son's marriage and when there was no job or employment to her son, as a worried mother she comforts and tells him that there is no need of a job as he has lots of property. "Of course you don't need a job if you don't want one. You have this house; it is yours after we go. And there is enough money in the bank to last your lifetime. Both of us are eager to see you married. It is for you to decide. (Life's Horoscope' p. 44). The same quality can be seen in most of the novels and short stories of the popular writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao. For instance in the Sahitya Akademi award winning novel, *The Guide* there is a depiction of the character of Railway Guide Raju's mother who is conventional, and traditional. She is always worried about her son like Parvathi. She is also portrayed as a religious and spiritual woman. In the novel, *Man Eater of Malgudi* also the wife of Naatraj also is portrayed as a traditional and conventional woman. She shows reverence to her tradition and religion and is also portrayed as an obedient wife to her husband. In the novel, *The Serpent and the Rope* also Rama's mother and step mother are also presented as traditional and conventional women. Mulk Raj Anand also portrays such traditional and religious and conventional women in his novels and short stories.

Devotion to the husbands is another important attribute of the conventional women in Khushwant Singh's short stories. Parvati Joshi is an obedient and submissive wife to her

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husband and she adjusts herself with the behaviour of her master without any murmuring or whispering.” She brought a huge dowry and was docile girl willing to adapt herself to the European life style of her husband, even when she wasn’t entirely comfortable with it. (Life’s Horoscope’p. 34).

Singh also portrays unconventional or independent women in his novels and short stories. Mohini Joshi is the character in the short story, ‘My Life’s Horoscope’. She is portrayed as an individualistic, liberal woman of flesh and blood. She was educated in a convent and she pursued her BA in English from a Christian Missionary college in Agra. She was good at English and had some liberal ideas about choosing her husband. She is the daughter of Joshi, a school teacher from Mathura. She hails from a middle class Bramhin family. She is not completely liberal when her parents bring her along with them to see the groom, as a gesture of obedience, to show her reverence touches the feet of her in laws and bends to touch the feet of her would be husband. She is not completely timid like many other Indian brides and has the desire to see her would be husband. The writer expresses the mind of Mohini in the following words. “ The impulse to see the young man who might become her husband overcame her shyness and she looked up. She thought he exactly looked like a young bramhin rishi, one who had just had his morning dip in the icy waters of the Ganga. He looked clean and in robust health. She was pleased at the prospect of being his wife. (Life’s Horoscope, 49)

Mohini is the portrayed as a courageous and a free woman and not as a shy person. On the first night of her marriage when her husband was curious to see her she responds to him as a bold woman when she says, ‘ take a good look. Do you like what you see’. (Life’s Horoscope, p. 58) When her husband compares her to *mrigini* a doe and other kinds of women mentioned in *Kamasutra*; Mohini becomes angry and tells him not to compare her to animals. She says what but- but? First a *mrigini*, then a *hastini* - I am an innocent girl, I don’t understand all this.(Life’s Horoscope, 61) When her husband appreciates her beauty she is bold enough to express her pleasure by telling him that she was selected as the beauty queen of the year. He becomes jealous and angry as he is a man. Mohini is also depicted as a logical and independent woman. When her husband speaks about *Kamasutra* and other books for making love she tells him that they don’t require anything for that purpose. She says, ‘ Professor sahib, you don’t have to read books to learn how to make love. We are married, I make love to you you make love to me. Isn’t that simple.(Life’s Horoscope, p.61). On the day of consummation when her husband goes on giving lecture about *kamasutra* and love making Mohini tells him to be practical. But we can’t spend our first night of marriage as if we are in a classroom..(Life’s Horoscope, 61)

Mohini is depicted as a realistic woman. When her husband was not ready for love making on the first night, she expresses her disappointment and tells him not to touch her. Singh writes,



“ she shrugged her shoulder and growled, Don’t touch me till you get permission from your holy dictionary.” (Life’s Horoscope, p. 61). Mohini is described as an honest and straight forward woman who speaks frankly about the truths of life which put her into a crisis with her husband. Following the classical Indian book *Kamasutra*, Mohan tells his wife that the consummation can be done only on the third night. The first two nights are meant to know each other. i.e husband and wife. On the third night when he fails to consummate with his wife, in a fit of embarrassment his wife Mohini calls her husband a *Gadha*, donkey. After two days she goes through the menstruation process and when her husband enquires she calls him *budhoo*, a fool, which leads to a breach between the husband and wife. Mohan being an expert in the Hindu Mythology and sacred texts who knew everything about *Kamasutra* fails to understand the common natural things about the anatomy of a woman which leads to the breakdown of their relationship. One interesting thing about the Indian sacred books is that they are silent about the anatomy of a woman where as they compare a woman to a *mrigini*, *hastini* etc. Which look ridiculous.

Mohini is also portrayed as an independent woman, who would like to face any kind of problem and give up anything for the sake of living an individual life. When she fails to receive happiness from her husband, unlike a traditional woman she thinks of breaking the tradition and leaving her husband’s house. Singh expresses the thoughts and feelings of Mohini in a beautiful manner. “ She looked forward to being married to the only son of a well to do family who was reputed to be a scholar. She also expected him to be an ardent lover. He assessed her as some zoologist did an animal- a deer, an elephant. Her beauty was wasted on the fool. She didn’t want to have anything more to do with him. Her only fear was her parents’ reaction. They believed that once a daughter was given away in marriage she only left her husband’s home on a bier, wrapped in red shroud signifying death in matrimonial bliss. She resolved to confront them. And if she failed, she would look for a job as a teacher in some school or college. She had the requisite qualification.’(Life’s Horoscope, p. 61)

Margaret Bloom is the protagonist of the short story, ‘Paradise’. She is also portrayed as an independent and modern woman. Her mother was an Anglican from America and her father was a businessman and a Jew from Poland. He was a womanizer. Margaret’s mother could not live with him and she takes a divorce from him and lives as an independent woman. She lives a free life and indulges in affairs with number of men. Like her mother, Margaret also lives a care free life and spoils her body and heart with adultery, drinks and bad friends. At one point, she realizes her behaviour and visits *Vaikunta Dhaam* ashram in India to cure herself and reform her character by breaking free from all her bad habits. She arrives in India at the Ashram and tells Swamiji about the purpose of coming to that Ashram. She says, “I was deeply disturbed, and decided to take a break. I looked for a place where I could find my true self. I came across Vaikunta Dhaam. From what I have seen in the last two days, I think I made the right choice. (Paradise p. 7)

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After coming to the Ashram Margaret lives for some time according to the rules of Ashram but soon she breaks all the rules and customs of Ashram and drinks alcohol, smokes Ganja and enjoys lesbian relationship with an Indian girl Putli. Unlike the other traditional characters Margaret does not restrict herself to home, husband and home making and instead lives the life of liberty and independence.

Thus, Khushwant Singh presents two kinds of women characters in his short stories. One type of characters are traditional and conventional who show deep reverence to the tradition. Parvathi Joshi in the short story 'Life's Horoscope' is portrayed as a conventional woman. Singh also portrays individualistic women characters who are independent and liberal in their thinking and deeds. Mohini in the short story, Life's Horoscope, and Margaret Bloom in the short story Paradise are presented as individual, independent, liberal, modern and free women who wish to live life not according to the tradition and custom which bind them to all kinds of social evils and instead choose their own lives.

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