

Jagdish Prasad Singh's *Summer Flowers*: A Journey from Lust to Lament

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Abstract:

Jagdish Prasad Singh is a less known name in the canon of Indian English writing despite his prolific creative contribution to the domain of Indian literature in both English and Hindi languages. On account of his contribution in the field of literature and education, he was conferred the fourth-highest civilian award Padma Shri by the Government of India in 2013. His novels in English are—*Curfew*, *Release*, *Summer Flowers*, *The Insider*, *The White Horse*, *The Sacred Fire*, and *Honeycomb*. In these novels, he displays his socio-political concerns particularly of post-Independent India. In his treatment of themes he is pragmatic and realistic in his approach and does not hesitate in bringing forth the prevailing shortcomings of social and political set up of Indian society; sometimes explicitly, and at other times, ironically. The present paper is an attempt to explore Jagdish Prasad Singh's realistic as well as moralistic approach in his treatment of the theme of love and sex in his novel *Summer Flowers*. The plot of the novel revolves around the principal character Kunti Devi and her adventurous life and its ultimate resultant hollowness in her life. In delineating the representation of insatiable physical hunger of his central character, Jagdish Prasad Singh stands at par with the renowned post-colonial Indian English novelist Khushwant Singh. On one hand, he seems to opine that the physical urge knows no bounds and breaks to pieces the restraints of all social, moral, ethical, and religious virtues, on the other hand, he

suggests that sexual adventures replete with obsessive lasciviousness eventually leads to hollowness and lament.

Keywords: Pragmatic, Lasciviousness, Social taboos, Jagdish Prasad Singh, Lament

Jagdish Prasad Singh was born on 31st December, 1934 in Mirganj, a village in Rohtas district of Bihar, India. He retired a few years back after thirty eight years of service as a college and university teacher. He was University Professor and Head of the Department of English, Magadh University, Bodh Gaya, Bihar, for over a decade before retirement. A prolific writer in both Hindi and English, he has written ten novels, two hundred stories, and half a dozen plays in Hindi. His stories have been published in seven volumes. He has also written three critical books on English fiction.

His English novels mainly discuss the transitional phase of socio-cultural and political milieu of post-independent India. Singh, through his humanistic and pragmatic approach, portrays the predicament of a common man who strives to locate himself in a world in which human values are changing very fast. His novels like those of Nayantara Sahagal impeccably blend the socio-cultural and political tribulations with the personal sufferings of an individual. Lively and cinematographic presentation through lucid flow of language forms the part of his narrative style. A reviewer of some of the early novels of Jagdish Prasad Singh rightly remarks when he writes:

[His] novels are remarkable for their technical perfection, their interesting stories which incorporate the whole of human experience in the lives of a few men and women, and the nature of their fantasy which creates in the reader an impression of being an active participant in the eternal drama of life unfolded in them. (B Singh 75)

Obsessive lasciviousness and its consequent perversion is one of the major themes that many of Singh's novels deal with. Even his noble characters like Ramadhar Pande in *The Sacred Fire*, Shubhankar Dayal in *The White Horse*, and Hema Agrawal in *The Insider* are portrayed to be swayed by this flaw to some extent. The novelist seems to advocate the outburst expression of natural biological urge having known no social, moral and ethical bound but at the same time he appears to warn against its resultant excessiveness as all such characters eventually meet their physical or psychological doom.

Sex and its representation in Indian art and culture, particularly in ancient literature, sculpture, and poetics had never been under the restriction of social taboos and religious codes. In ancient Indian civilization, sex was not confined to the purpose of procreation only rather it was bestowed with some divine power. Sex as an art of love has been scientifically eulogised by some of the celebrated works of Indian literature like Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* which has been acclaimed by the Western scholars as the 'world's first definitive manual on the art and science of love'. But surprisingly enough, in post-colonial India

its explicit representation in literature and art became a matter of derision, and an attempt to do so has been labelled as pornographic, erotic and controversial et al. Still there came forward some writers like Kamala Das in poetry and Khushwant Singh in the world of fiction who believe in authentic and realistic presentation of physical yearnings which also form the part of basic human passion. Jagdish Prasad Singh is a noteworthy addition to this literary culture as he too considers sex as the core of the man-woman relationship and realistically presents it with its oddities. Like Khushwant Singh, he has made age long concealed consciousness bare in his novels.

But at the very outset, it is impertinent to proclaim that sex as an act of procreation or as an art of love or as a divine gift is none of Jagdish Prasad Singh's concerns, rather the obsession with sex and its consequent perversion is the main theme that he has dealt with in most of his novels and *Summer Flowers* is not an exception. *Summer Flowers* is not a novel as far as the organic unity and magnitude of this literary genre in modern sense demands it to be for the purpose of the exploration of characters and motives of the complicated plot(s), rather it is a work of fiction comprising of two novellas entitled *Pink* and *Red*. However, there is still a unifying motif that binds these two parts together and that is the obsessive lasciviousness of the characters of both the parts, though the plot and characters of the one are completely different from those of the other. The novelist has dealt with this theme in such a manner that some of his characters seem to have been suffering from some psychological disease that shows the abnormal appetite for carnal pleasure.

This paper is confined to the exploration of the principal character Kunti Devi's journey from lust to lament that forms the plot of the first part of the novel—*Pink*. The plot of the novel moves in a circular motion as it starts with the lament, moves ahead through a flashback to the adventurous and lustful life led by the protagonist, and then once again ends with celebrating the lament. It is the story of a Lady Principal of a government college, Kunti Devi, who is also the narrator of the story. It starts with her pondering over her past on her fifty-fifth birthday, the day on which she feels a kind of hollowness in her life. She realizes that having achieved everything, she has nothing.

Kunti Devi is a sex-maniac who indulges herself with many a man, one after the other, during her expedition. She hankers for sex and her addiction has been portrayed by the novelist like that of a drunkard who seeks relief in liquor in the state of dejection and the one who cannot enjoy the state of happiness without its help finding the occasion for it. The seed of her sexual abnormality was sown the day on which she was molested by her distant relative, Nihore Singh, on the petty charge of plucking mangoes from a tree when she was only in standard three. If we scrutinize his other novels we observe that Jagdish Prasad Singh is fond of apprising his readers of unexpected and unusual responses to sexual behaviour on the part of his characters and Kunti Devi is just an addition to it. She confesses that instead of opposing the act, she had wished even at that tender age to gain new experience through her active cooperation. And though she had experienced

great pain in the process, she had also had a kind of satisfaction, which was just like that of a student who has passed her first examination. Her bizarre response is evident when she shares the experience:

I was greatly apprehensive and terrified, but I did not have a strong feeling of opposition to what Nihore Singh was going to do. Perhaps, I wanted, without consciously being aware of it, to gain a new experience, and though I experienced great pain, I had also a kind of satisfaction perhaps the kind of satisfaction which a student has when he passes an examination. (*Pink* 8)

This cannot be described as the normal psychological state of mind of a girl of eleven years old. But through this episode, the novelist seems to propagate that physical urge is not bound to age and finding the occasion it can outburst at any time.

The novelist through delving deep into the psychological strata of Kunti Devi has attempted to establish a belief that this lecherous temperament is something that could be hereditary, and like physique and beauty, it may pass on from generation to generation as an inheritance. To add more, it could also be the result of the situations and circumstances one has to undergo. Kunti's mother, we are told, 'was a woman tall like her and equally full-bodied' and had a number of paramours at the neighbouring village and Kunti was allegedly not born of her legal father. Similarly, Kunti, too, had relationship with a number of men and her eldest daughter, Rama was also not born of Girish, Kunti's legal husband. The narrator expresses her inquisitiveness regarding this inheritance:

Is it true that the character of the offspring is influenced not only by the character of the parents but also by the situations and experiences the mother has to pass through when the child is in the womb? Is it the reason why my elder daughter, Rama, who was growing in my womb in those days, came out with not only my body and appearance but also my insatiable hunger for men? (81)

After having been tied in socially acceptable nuptial bond, she had expected from her husband to get the physical and mental fulfilment that has eluded her even after completely surrendering herself with total involvement on her part to more than half a dozen men. But to her dismay, her husband causes her a great sense of disappointment on the very first night of their meeting, when he gives a harangue on 'the necessity of cautious steps for success in life' which requires staying away from carnal pleasure. Expecting her to be chaste and loyal to him he advises her by juxtaposing the Indian mythical character of Kunti with that of his wife:

Has not Kunti of the great period of Indian antiquity, with her unparalleled chasteness and unequalled loyalty to her husband, presented a sublime example for the emulation of the Indian Women? I consider it to be God's special favour that you possess the same name as that of the great woman. I want, therefore, that you should always keep before your mind'

eyes the ideal of the great Kunti of unequalled devotion and loyalty to her husband. (16)

The name given to the principal character by the novelist on the base of mythical character—Kunti of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*—seems to a part of his stylistics that is full of ironical implication. Her husband's remark quoted above certainly proves to be an ironic one not only on his expectation of his wife but also on her character and temperament. As we proceed further in the novel, we learn that she remains neither chaste nor loyal to her husband, and that even Girish's expectation of his wife takes a U-turn with the passage of time. Though, Kunti was disheartened unexpectedly on the first night, it proved a boon in disguise for her as the experience gained that night moulded her fate which had to take a different path. Had her husband not disappointed her on that memorable occasion, she would not have undergone her sexual expeditions gaining a variety of experiences that her innate nature suited best.

As a result of her husband's indifference towards sexual activities despite being in the nuptial bond, her hunger for carnal pleasure increases with uncontrolled aggression. Under the influence of an inscrutable whim, she starts hunting for men who could satiate her with physical pleasure and she did not leave any chance to enjoy it even on the least possible occasions. She finds one such occasion during her stay at her maternal uncle's house after her marriage. She develops a strong desire to make love with one of her uncle's friends, Ramashanker, whose 'eyes possessed a dreaminess which tempted her to enter them to find out what they contained'. She advocates the real cause of the immediate perusal of her desire of fulfilling the demand of her body in a logical way:

...I get release from this unrest only when I have obtained the [desired] thing. This unrest generally causes me more unhappiness than is caused, sometimes, by the attainment of the desired object. For this reason I generally refrain from crushing the desires which take possessions of me, and try, as best as I can, to see them materialise. (19)

Infidelity with the consent and support of the spouse is also one of the queer aspects of temperament of Singh's characters showing and promoting dedication to licentiousness. What surprises us is that Girish deliberately leaves his wife alone with her easy-to-find paramours on several occasions so that she may enjoy what she always pines for. And on these occasions it appears that he has developed an unusual fondness of throwing his wife in other's arms as if by doing so he wishes to compensate his inability to satiate her. He allows one of her paramours, Narayananand, a swami in disguise, to put off all her clothes and to rub the whole of her body with a wet towel before his eyes when she got fainted on some occasion. Why does Girish display such kind of abnormal behaviour of voluntarily letting his wife enjoy carnal pleasure with other men, is not only a matter of surprise but it also requires a diligent and thorough psychological scrutiny. He perhaps does so because he wants to enjoy the company of people enriched with money and power and for that he uses the utmost sexual urge of his wife as a ladder. At first he does it

for the company of Purushottamdas who was the son of a big businessman and political man and after the death of Purushottamdas, he does it for that of Narayanand. Girish's manly prowess is of no use for his wife as she does not take him seriously as a man, not even for having a new kind of sexual experience as she does with other men. He merely acts a facilitator in his wife's carnal ventures with other men and seems to be very much satisfied with this task. His skill for staying away from the presence of his wife and her paramours on the pretext of some or the other work sometimes fills her heart with a feeling of disgust but she is so eager to lose herself in the intoxication to have the feeling of a new kind of experience that she hardly remembers her unprincipled husband. She elaborates the form of intoxication:

It was a kind of intoxication which I felt for the first time in my life. I had known the pleasure of man before Purushottam came into my life, and I have never been deprived of it after his departure from my life; but the kind of intoxication that his company brought into my life had never been there before nor did it ever come afterwards. (30-31)

In her relationship with Purushottam, Kunti claims to have fallen in love for the first time in her life and that she surrenders her body to him out of love but the reader finds it very difficult to believe her claim because a lady, like her, who has ever nourished a never-dying physical hunger, could hardly love anyone genuinely. And it is evident as the plot develops as we learn that after the untimely death of Purushottam, she hardly takes one month to shift her attention towards swami Narayanand, her new paramour found by her husband. She gets attracted towards sturdy Narayanand only out of hunger of her body and to get a new kind of carnal experience, surely not for love. When she comes in close contact with Narayanand, her restlessness grows hundred-fold as her body starts hankering for the pleasure of a man, which has eluded her for two months. At one point Jagdish Prasad Singh appears to echo D. H. Lawrence when he exposes her psychological bent during the state of her nakedness in Narayanand's bedroom:

My naked body, which was covered with a thin sheet of cloth, seemed to me to be some other woman's body, liberated from the control of the brain and guided by the laws of its own requirements. It was unable to hear any voice except the voice of its own blood; it was blind to everything else except what it yearned for. (56-57)

But the basic difference in the projection of physical intimacy by these two novelists lies in the fact that the voice of blood for D. H. Lawrence is for some divine fulfilment but in the case of Kunti Devi, it is purely an example of repeated sexual perversion. For the former the call is for something divine, spiritual; whereas for the latter, it is purely physical and of beastly nature leading to nothingness. Her yearning for a male body is so great that she does not hesitate a little in unveiling her beastly passion for it:

The fearlessness and spontaneity of my surrender was somewhat like that of bitch in heat; there was no love in it, but only a hunger which had turned

into a great fire and had mantled my existence. I did not care in the least about the direction the liquid of my existence took; in reality, I had no control on it, and I was incapable of changing its course even if I wanted and tried. (58)

This beastly nature regarding physical requirements and its realisation is represented in the novel not only through the character of Kunti Devi rather it is nurtured by some other characters also in more or less degree. Her only long-lasting paramour Narayananand who was the president of All World Saints Society had relationship with a number of women. He had nominated them either members or office bearers of the child organisations of the society and in that way those women were his mistresses and the source of his physical gratification. His headmistress Kunti Devi during her stay at the office of the society expounds the animal passion nurtured by Narayananand and his mistresses:

But it had become clear to me in the beginning of our acquaintance itself that in matters of man-woman relationship [Narayananand] was nearer to an animal than to a man; and this fact did not displease either myself or dozens of the women who came into contact with him. I found these women were as satisfied and happy as a herd of cows grazing in a pasture land is when there is a bull in its midst. (65)

So far as the dormant sexual leanings are concerned, Kunti Devi in a way seems to be the female incarnation of Mohan Kumar, a character in Khushwant Singh's novel *The Company of Women*. Her preference for sex, as it is in the case of Mohan Kumar, is almost an inborn instinct which she cannot overcome. Like Kunti, Mohan Kumar, writes K. K. Singh, "has no control over his sexual passion and he tries his best to find some new ways to satisfy his dormant emotion and passion" (K. Singh 18). In displaying unusual sexual hunger Kunti Devi seems to resemble Champak of *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* by Khushwant Singh. It is evident when Namita Panda writes:

As a modern novelist, being influenced by Western civilizations, Khushwant Singh has employed unusual sexual culture in the novel through Champak. Champak is a sex hungry woman. She is a unique lady in the whole range of Indian fiction in English. (Panda 67)

Kunti Devi had enjoyed the carnal pleasure with a number of men and even now at this age she is not able to refrain herself from indulging in the same state with the peon of her college. She is addicted to physical relationship with men to such an extent that she cannot imagine a life without it and if she tries to avoid it, it really hurts her physically as well as mentally. As she admits:

I know that it is wrong. But I cannot live without it... I have to accept Ram Bharose's invitation in order to maintain my physical and mental balance. A number of rumours regarding my relationship with him are afloat. He does not, even before others, show me the respect which a peon should show towards the Principal of his college...But I cannot remove him from service because his stay with me is essential for removing the tension in my body and mind. (*Pink* 5)

But after a prolonged and varied sexual experience, she eventually realizes that all her endeavours to get herself fulfilled—both mentally and physically—through a variety of experiences proved to be futile, howsoever hard she tried, and even on the verge of her sexual expeditions she remains unfulfilled and feels a kind of emptiness in her heart as she introspects, ‘have I lost even in victory?’

We thus can conclude that Kunti’s lustful expedition that she had undertaken since her childhood ends at last with the lament when she experiences the hollowness within her physical and psychological strata on her fifty-fifth birthday. This lament increases manifold when she observes the same insatiable physical hunger in her daughter Rama. Though she strives hard to overcome ‘the feeling of loneliness and emptiness’ through the same act of sexual indulgence, yet it proves to be Keats’ attempt to escape the reality through the ‘full-throated’ songs of the Nightingale. The ambivalence of the presentation of the whole sexual expedition of Kunti Devi lies in the fact that just as the outburst expression of suppressed sexual desire is a reality, its obsession resulting in lament is no less than real. The hollowness that she realises on the verge of her sexual expedition is her nemesis and it presents Jagdish Prasad Singh as realist and moralist at the same time.

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