

## A Tale of Life and Lust: A Study of ‘The Company of Women’

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### Abstract:

*Published in the year 1999, The Company of Women become one of the major reasons as to why Khushwant Singh is mocked as the ‘dirty old man’ of Indian journalism by the critics. The present novel is the fictional yet erotic tale of one Mohan Kumar who is a womaniser and a sexual maniac. Singh has shown the audacity to describe Kumar’s varied sexual acrobatics with a series of women during his university days in the US as well as his quest for lust after a failed marriage. The novel is replete with several vivid descriptions of Kumar’s sexual acts with a multitude of women only to satisfy his carnal desires. Unlike Lawrence’s protagonists in ‘Lady Chatterley’s lover’, Khushwant Singh’s Kumar is never in the search of an emotional communion which percolates into the soul. Mohan Kumar’s quest is just to enjoy the pleasures of momentary, physical, business-like relationships. The present paper is an academic attempt to weigh the pros and cons of the Mephistophilean outlook of Mohan Kumar towards sex and also the thematic use of sex by Khushwant Singh.*

**Keywords:** erotic tale, womaniser, sexual maniac, quest for lust, carnal desires, sexual acrobatics, emotional communion, multitude of women.

The act of sex, in almost every religion, is considered to be a sacred relationship between a man and a woman as it is the first step which makes the whole act of procreation possible. It is like sharing the Divinity’s joy of creation and is often fully sanctioned by society and religion. It is not for nothing that the Christian bridegroom promises to his bride, “With my body I thee worship.” In Hindu scriptures too it is considered, to be the first of the sixteen ‘Sanskaras’ for it begins the individual lives. And that is why, it becomes a matter of great surprise as to how a Sikh like Khushwant Singh, who is fully aware of the whole religious, social, sentimental dimensions of sex (particularly in India) makes an audacious attempt to create a seemingly lecherous protagonist and paints his varied sexual encounters in vivid colours with his exceptional penmanship. The novel in the issue brought to him an enormous amount of notoriety and nick-names like ‘King Leer’, ‘Kisswant Singh’, ‘the gland old man of Indian life and letters’ and ‘the puck of Indian Literary Scene’. In the Author’s note to this novel, Singh himself writes:

“As a man gets older, his sex instincts travel from his middle to his head. What he wanted to do in his younger days but did not due to nervousness, lack of response or opportunity, he does it in his mind. I started writing this novel when I was eighty-three. I finished it in eighty-five. An equally apt title for it could be: ‘The Fantasies of an Octogenarian’.”

The company of Women is often compared to “Lady Chatterley’s Lover”. Readers and critics always intend to look for the thematic affinity or the similar treatment of sex in both the works. However, a deep seated study of both the texts lays bare the fact that Lawrence’s protagonists are in the pursuit of attaining fulfilment through sex whereas no such attempt is being made by Singh’s protagonist. For Connie and Mellors, sex is a means; for Kumar sex becomes the only end!

According to Lawrence:

“Relationship is threefold. First there is the relationship to the living universe. Then comes the relationship of man to woman. Then comes the relationship of man to man. And each is a blood relationship, no mere spirit or mind” (72).

Both Lawrence and Singh have used sex as the theme of their particular works. It is also a noteworthy fact that both the works are the last novels penned by the respective novelists. However, both of them are quite unique when it comes to the treatment of sex in a literary form. Lawrence presents a vital, individualized woman who ultimately starts enjoying the act of sex with her lover because her husband is semi-paralyzed and hence, fulfilment becomes impossible in the marriage. On the other hand, Singh tells the colourful yet woeful tale of a successful, sexy young businessman who meets his tragic end because of his mindless and emotionless sexual encounters with a series of women all through his life. Lawrence’s sex is pulsating with life and meaning, Singh’s sex is momentary, physical and dead on the inside.

On surface, Mohan Kumar appears as a pure womaniser who wants no other form of companionship from the women in his life except for the sexual kind. However, when dug deeper he appears to be an erstwhile pure youth who gradually transforms into a sexual debauch. Much of his decline is because of the corrupting influence of the industrialized western culture and the changing social patterns of the westernized upper section of the urban India. Just like any other modern psychological novel, *The Company of Women* also opens in a dramatic manner using the exceptional ‘flashback technique’:

For Mohan Kumar, it should have been a day of rejoicing. It was not. He had looked forward to it for twelve years. His wife had at long last decided to leave him; despite the months of acrimony that had preceded it, she had agreed to give him a divorce provided she had custody of their two children. He was so anxious to get his freedom, that besides the two children he agreed to give her whatever else she wanted in the way of alimony: jewellery that he and his father had given her, furniture, pictures—anything she named. She wanted nothing. She seemed as eager to get rid of him as he was to get rid of her. That afternoon she had packed her things and driven away to her parent’s home. She had not bothered to say goodbye. The children sensed that this was not just another visit to their grandparents. They embraced and kissed him before running out to get into their mother’s black Mercedes. The car had shot out of the gate with unnecessary speed; she had made sure the children have no time to turn back and wave goodbye. Mohan should have been celebrating his newly won freedom from his nagging, ill-tempered wife. But as he sat in the balcony of his double-storied bungalow, his feet resting on the railing, smoking a Havana Cigar, he felt empty inside and shrouded in loneliness. There was all-pervading silence. No screaming of children fighting with each other... their squabbles had often irritated him. Now he missed them. The house suddenly had far too many rooms, and the night too many hours. He was weary.

When one carefully analyses the opening paragraphs, certain findings come into revelation:

1. Episodic plot.
2. Psychologically – complex protagonist with a round character.
3. Human emotions like passion, lust, self-centered attitude and freedom overpower all other social and traditional norms.
4. Gender-equality is no longer a myth. Women are engaged in free sexual activities.
5. Separation of parents causing traumatic dilemmas in the innocent psyche of children.
6. Loneliness and alienation cannot be avoided even when random sexual encounters are an everyday affair.
7. Emotional hollowness overrides physical fulfilment.

8. Typical middle-class mindset causes more harm than benefit.

Mohan Kumar, having just returned from the US after completing his education, is the most eligible bachelor in the Hindu Punjabi community, he allows himself to be offered for sale through the matrimonial columns of an English newspaper. He ultimately agrees to marry Sonu who is Lala Rai Bahadur Achint Ram's daughter as the family has acquired new wealth and they are the highest bidder. Even western training and foreign education is not able to change the mentality of Kumar who blindly follows the reeking Indian tradition of dowry. It is no wonder that the marriage starts breaking just after the birth of their first-born son. A matrimonial alliance based on the foundation of greed and wealth can never be fulfilling for any of the partners. Moreover, Sonu is ill-tempered and possessive to an alarming extent. She cannot even tolerate the presence of Mohan's elderly father. The old man is the only person whom Kumar loves dearly and respects unimaginably. This affection for his old father is the only silver lining in the dark and dank personality of Mohan. The poor man tries to keep his father and his wife away from each other. He buys another bungalow as he flourishes as a businessman. But his father shifts to an ashram in Haridwar. After his departure, Kumar turns into an amateur philosopher and ruminates over love, marriage and sex. However, no rumination and introspection could save his marriage with Sonu. Even after the birth of their daughter in the seventh year of the marriage, they finally decide to leave each other for good. And thus their loveless marriage comes to an end, making a new beginning for the Princeton-educated Mohan!

Mohan is now free like a bird and hence decides to soar to the highest skies of pleasure with the help of wings made of lust. Once again, at the age of forty, he gives an advertisement in The Times of India; but this time for a live-in partner:

Seeking a live-in companion for a mutually agreed time duration. Willing to pay air-fare to Delhi and back and Rs.10,000 per month for expenses. Free board and lodging in comfortable home with three servants and chauffeur driven car. Religion no bar. Relationship to be without strings attached on either side. If interested, enclose photograph and bio-data. Correspond to box no.\_ (11)

Now this is not the style of a typical Indian man in his forties. No matter how much he craves for sex and physical companionship, he will never announce such a thing in the public domain. This audacious advertisement by Mohan marks a new beginning in the sociological framework of the Indian society. This Epicurean or rather Hedonist way of life receives mixed-response and just like his creator, Singh, Mohan too is absolutely clear-minded regarding the very foundation of man-woman relationship. Just before marrying Sonu(who lacked class but was filthy rich), Mohan himself confesses:

I weighed the pros and cons of marriage. To me sex was more pressing need than love or companionship. For too long we have been fooled into believing that the basis of a happy man-woman relationship is love. Love is an elusive concept and means different things to different people. There is nothing elusive about lust because it means the same thing to all people: it is the physical expression of liking a person of the opposite sex: Cuddling, kissing and fondling leading to sexual intercourse. Love cannot last very long without lust. Lust has no time limit and is the true foundation of love and affection. (137-138).

The noteworthy point is that Khushant Singh, through the character of Mohan, intends to raise some sociological questions which seem perfectly significant and relevant in the evolving of a 'progressive-minded and permissive society'. The question 'whether physical pleasure is the only source of happiness to a person' remains unanswered even today. A society which believes in healthy relationships without any guilt-complexes attached with sex will evolve only when the netizens let go of sham-morality, double-dealing, deception and the general hypocrisy. Through Mohan Kumar, Khushwant Singh seems to be making a prophecy for the years to come as TV channels and internet are busy in relaying western music and other such programmes which easily enchant the adolescent youth.

In such a scenario, free and frank conversations regarding sex and mandatory sex-education in academic institutions become the need of the hour. Perhaps Khushwant Singh had experienced a *déjà vu* as he keeps advocating for a more open, more permissive and more tolerant society (as far as sex is concerned) through his protagonist who avers in a chapter entitled ‘Susanthika’:

After I got my divorce, I felt that I had been freed of Sonu and could lead my life the way I wanted to. I had not reckoned with her vindictiveness. Whenever I went to the Gym-khana or the Golf Club, I would sense a change in the attitude of my friends and their wives towards me. They stared at me as if they were seeing me for the first time. The men made simple remarks calculated to hurt or irritate me... Sonu was undoubtedly responsible for the gossip (of my prospective marriage with a physiotherapist from Goa, Molly Gomes). Her servants must have got to know from mine that a woman who passed for a lady doctor was staying with me. My sour ex-wife would not miss any opportunity to making my life public... Sonu succeeded in giving me the reputation of a compulsive womanizer. Although many young women eyed me with a mixture of desire and curiosity, I know they would never have the courage to step out with me. In their parents’ eyes I was simply a *lafunga*- a no good loafer who consorted with women of ‘loose character’. It was the loss of human dignity that bothered me. There was nothing dirty in what I did, but their looks and remarks made me out to be a filthy sex-maniac. Gradually, I stopped going to the clubs and turned down invitations to parties. I stayed at home, drank alone, listened to the music or watched TV. I wallowed in the misery of one whom no one loves. For a time I quite enjoyed my loneliness. (251-252)

Furthermore, Mohan ruminates about taking on concubines on a short-term basis and says: “It might have been if Sonu had put me out of her mind and stopped resenting me. On the other hand if it were not Sonu it could have been someone else, male or female, who resented my having a good time. But what was the alternative to the clandestine affairs I had been having? How could I openly have a woman companion whose parents, brothers, sisters, ex-husbands would accept her having an affair with a divorced man and not get upset with her? I could not think a way out of the impasse because I needed sex on a regular basis.... I also realised that the sort of relationship I sought with the women made me a social outcast. I did not like that. I wanted to regain respectability, but how was I going to do that in a society which could not accept my enjoying intimacy with unattached willing women?”(252)

Obviously, such questions are a serious and sincere attempt to reform the sociological framework and the psychological bearing of a society which is passing through a transitional phase and is struggling hard to strike a perfect balance between its conventional value-system and imported western ways of living which are a side-effect of globalization and digitalization.

The ending of the novel is very post-modernist in texture. Mohan, who is showering in the bliss of ‘the rediscovering of his manhood’ catches HIV as a result of having unprotected sex with a Bai in a Bombay-hotel. A Pall of gloom envelopes him when Dr. Malhotra says to him:

“We can control HIV and prevent it growing into full-blown AIDS for many years. You don't have to worry about longevity. You can have full span of life- another ten or twenty years. But no more sex.”(290)

The irony and seriousness of the situation deepens when after two years of relatively healthy and normal life, eschewing sex, Mohan falls a prey to Lung TB and AIDS. By this time he has already willed his property to his children. One night after vomiting blood he realizes that his time has come. Having read Bhagwad Gita from time to time, he decides to leave as he thinks like a stoic now and believes that his children are better off without him. As he gulps down thirty sleeping pills one by one, he keeps reciting Gayatri Mantra and the serene image of his father clings to his mind. Surprisingly enough not even one concubine of his entire sexual tenure is recalled by dying Mohan Kumar. He rests his head on the pillow and with tears rolling down his eyes left the physical world.

Through his usual nonchalant and casual manner and with the help of his protagonist, Khushwant Singh wants to shock the readers out of their biases, taboos about sex and conventional attitudes. Singh juxtaposes two possible lifestyles; one of Mohan's, and other of his elderly father and tries to bring about a change of thought. One of these two perspectives relates to the Epicurean philosophy of life in which: ... pleasure of the self is the one good and our innately sort goal, to which all other values are subordinated. (340)

The novel also hints at the long discussed women empowerment. Although the women in the novel are secondary characters, even then Singh has been successful in portraying a wide range of women of all sorts and types. On one hand there is Sonu, ill-tempered and arrogant because of her father's wealth while on the other hand there are so called liberated ones like Jessica Browne, Sarojini Bhardwaj, Yasmin, Mary Joseph, Molly Gomes and Susanthika who readily go to bed with Mohan without any hesitation, regret or guilt. Thus, through this novel Singh has also dealt with the issues like gender equality, individual sexuality and marital discord etc.

Sex, being an integral and indispensable part of life, cannot be ignored or treated in a haphazard manner. Even the great transcendentalists never condemned the sensual pleasures. The importance of the soul as well as the body was realised by immersion and the Thoreau also. And hence, one finds out that the novel seems to be advocating the need for balance and moderation in every walk of life. The alternative use of first person and third person narrative enhances the richness of the novel. The Company of Women, thus, operates on a multidimensional and wider canvas than what the title seems to suggest.

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