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Carnal Life: Quest for Love and Self in Khushwant Singh's *Burial at Sea* and Tarun Tejpal's *the Alchemy of Desire*

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Abstract

Khushwant Singh and Tarun Tejpal can be bound in a common strand for their treatment of ribald subject-matter such as sex. Nonetheless, both the writers save themselves from any artistic flaw as they do not go down to the drain while dealing with the themes of lust in their fictional worlds. In case of Khushwant Singh a few licentious works may be exception; while in case of Tarun Tejpal, as the readers and a few critics have observed, it is the first half of his novel *the Alchemy of Desire*. Nonetheless, this paper explores the truth that the characters in Singh's *Burial at Sea* and the protagonist in Tejpal's *the Alchemy of Desire* are not flawed or restricted to the baser level of life. Victor Jai Bhagwan, Ma Durgeshwari, Bharti and Dhananjay Maharaj in the former and the protagonist in the later do not tend to fall in the gorge of lustful life; as instead of remaining confined to the material comforts and experiencing only carnal gratification they rise high to the quest of spiritual self or true love. The characters in *Burial at Sea* undergo change or by nature they cling to higher self while in *the Alchemy of Desire* the protagonist undergoes a drastic transformation after the first half of the narrative. The reality of quest for higher self or true love has found good artistic treatment at the hands of both the novelists as the characters qualify for right renunciation in right sense.

Key words: self, spiritual, sex, lust, characters, renunciation

It has been critically observed that the uniqueness of Khushwant Singh's writing lies in his bold treatment of ribald subject matter; in some analyses some thinkers have ended up terming him mere a licentious writer who, like any other sex-obsessed person from sub-continent, tries to satisfy his unfulfilled desires through pen. In case of *The Company of Women* Singh he has termed it as – 'my senile fantasies'. However, towering figure of 'literary'

Khushwant Singh having ample 'pedantic acumen' cannot be overshadowed under one iota of writer's 'senile fantasies' even in his treatment of carnal aspects of life. In his fictional world carnal desires or needs are indispensable in life; one is destined to get on the path of meaningful life through the realms of corporeal libido. In *Burial at Sea* (2004) artistic hands of Khushwant Singh do not let the protagonist Jai Bhagwan and other characters stagger down to drain lasciviously.

Jai Bhagwan does fall flat to the temptation of carnal bliss, yet, as being three-dimensional character, he attains heights above the worldliness in the final pages of the novel. He dies, not as sex-starved, but with fulfilled heart, with the spiritual desire to be buried in the bosom of vast sea; this reflects one's spiritual quest, in essence, to merge into godhead. Outside agent, Valerie Bottomley gives young Jai Bhagwan the name for her pronunciation convenience--- Victor; Jai Bhagwan, in a way, proves he somewhat victor, over millions of others, to raise himself above the worldly desires. Unlike others he is not swept in the flood of libidinous waves but transcends towards where one can realize himself. Even great Mahatma Gandhi gives testimony of Victor's rising high:

He brought his family to be blessed by Gandhi. The Mahatma took the five-year-old Jai Bhagwan in his lap and asked, 'Beta, what do you want to be when you grow up?' The boy replied without hesitation, 'Bapu, I want to become a Mahatma like you.'

The Mahatma hugged the boy close to his chest. 'You will become a bigger man than your Bapu. May Ishwara give

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you a long life!’ (*Burial at Sea*, 2005: 11)

Not only Victor Jai Bhagwan but other characters in the novel do not descend into abysmal gorge of mere fleshy fulfilment in life. Ma Durgeshwari though steps down to the role of Jai Bhagwan’s kept concubine, yet, finally she sticks to her role of a spiritual Sadhvi. She reciprocally takes Victor as the agent of self-realization, means may be anything—love or sex. She already has her mystery and aura--- a deterrence to keep away common people:

She is a powerful tantric. People say she was born in a cave in high Himalayas. She owns a tiger called Sheroo who I’ve been told is a strict vegetarian. He follows her everywhere like a pet dog. She takes him to the Ganga every day and they bathe in the river together. People are scared of going anywhere near them. They call her *Sheron wali ma*--- mother of tigers. (B S: 128)

It goes to the credit of Jai Bhagwan himself and his creator that the dimensions of his person mushroom up with the development of the plot in the novel. Jai Bhagwan’s spiritual self, man of curiosity, curious to the mystery of life, comes to the fore; but such odyssey goes through the path of other person, appropriately if that person is known as the apostle of spirituality and mystery. Ma Durgeshwari proves to be so:

Victor saw her early the next morning from his balcony. She was going downhill, the tiger following on her heels. They made an impressive sight. She had a saffron cloth wrapped around her torso and a length of tiger skin around her hips as a skirt. She had a trishul in one hand. Her long raven-black hair was left loose. As she strode down to the Ganga her hair caught the breeze and streamed behind her. (B S: 129)

Singh has given Ma Durgeshwari’s person to evolve not within the shadows of Jai Bhagwan’s towering life, but as an individual. This tantric woman holds respectable position in the family of India’s big

industrialist. e. Jai Bhagwan. Even after death of the protagonist Durgeshwari doesn’t jump to the role of an avarice-ridden person who has been eyeing the wealth of her lover or disciple. She gives much respect to the last will of Jai Bhagwan whom she manages to be buried in the sea. In the yacht, in which Victor’s dead-body is placed and where only a few are allowed, she bids him final adieu, showing the signs of love and spiritual communion:

Bharti had kept her promise to allow Ma Durgeshwari a private moment with Jai Bhagwan. Ma Durgeshwari shut the door behind her, approached the open coffin and stood still for a minute. Then she bent down and kissed the dead man full on his lips. Before she opened the door, she pulled out a small pair of scissors from her kurta and snipped three strands of Jai Bhagwan’s sparse blue-black hair.

In portraying other characters, along with shades of their life, Singh’s art of characterization does not seem to be flawed as none of the main characters remains confined to the baser life. Swami Dhananjay Maharaj remains a yogi and clings to his yogic austerity despite his fleshy relationship with Bharti, Jai Bhagwan’s daughter. As fourteen-year-old Jai Bhagwan had sexual encounter with a London harlot Bharti too experiences same type of carnal encounter with a corrupting agent Nair, very much in London, in the same apartment. Khushwant Singh does, but artistically, signify the analogy of sexual experience in the life of father and daughter by designing the destinies. He does not glorify sex over love or spiritual quests. Neither Victor nor Bharti gets stuck to the temptation of lust, but they march ahead in life, “She hadn’t even left him money to get back to Eton. Where would he find the bus fare? He spent Christmas Day in his flat reading desultorily and listening to the radio. He did not want to ruin Valarie’s Christmas by telling her what had rendered him penniless.” (B S: 57)

May it be Victor, Durgeshwari, Dhananjay or Bharti--- the author is artistically sound not to let his characters flawed in the baser vortex of mundane life; his characters in the novel are set to rise higher, in quest of true love or realization of the self. Khushwant Singh tries to debunk the image or genre of his labeled writing in this novel. He does keep the urge, necessity and indispensability of bodily appeasement in lives of his characters, yet they are not restricted only to the mundane

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fulfillment of life. The idea leaps up, that should be near or around truth, that the journey of self-realization, spiritual quests and true love is possible through the baser experiences of life and the sexual experience, if not gratification, is one of them. Khushwant Singh seems to share a lot with Osho and Indian concept of true renunciation. As in the case of lord Buddha that if someone possesses something in abundance only such person qualifies to renounce something. Buddha renounced the royal comforts as he was a prince. If someone boasts of having renounced the duniyadari and material comforts, who was born and been through sheer penury, such renunciation should not count. Singh's characters are not found sex-starved and thus they qualify for spiritual quests in life as they have been through the material-worldly life.

This concept of renunciation or quest for self also holds truth in the case of the protagonist in Tarun Tejpal's *Alchemy of Desire*. Tejpal has been under the shelling of criticism from critics and readers for his boyish obsession of sex in this novel. Sex-mania or sex obsession overshadows other dimensions of the protagonist, at least in the first half of the narrative. Nonetheless, for good craftsmanship, contents and other aspects, which are necessary for a fictional narrative in strict sense, the novel has received kudos from the towering figures like V.S. Naipaul, "At last—a new and brilliantly original novel from India." (<http://www.panmacmillan.co.in/bookdetails/9780330435550/The-Alchemy-of-Desire/239>)

Unless the protagonist discovers enlightening scriptures of Catherine, the novel does reveal the fact of typical Indian male obsession for sex; however subject-matter related to the lust finds artistic treatment at the hands of Tejpal. The protagonist is obsessed with the body of his wife Fizz who tries to bring home the idea of the importance and indispensability of carnal gratification in life. His emphasis on sex and lustful life serves as a preamble or like a hypothesis in the research which the author makes all arguments to prove it right, "Love is not the greatest glue between two people. Sex is. The laws of school Physics will tell you it is more difficult to prise apart two bodies joined at the middle than those connected anywhere near the top or the bottom." (*the Alchemy of Desire*: 03)

Until more than half of the narrative he does not accept anything to change his perspective in life for the paramount importance of lust over anything. The instrument of transformation is introduced by Tejpal much later when he discovers the diary and write-ups of Catherine.

From this initial obsession, the novel treks through the narrator's attempts at writing different novels and his life as a journalist in Delhi, until it reaches the source of its dramatic tension on page 281 with the discovery of a cache of diaries written by Catherine, a glamorous American adventuress and the previous owner of the house the couple have bought in a hill station. This moves it to a colonial phase, tracing the trajectory of Catherine's relationship to the son of a nawab and other matters, which actually holds more urgency than the narrative of the first half. (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/may/21/fiction.vsnaiipaul>)

Unlike the characters in Khushwant Singh's *Burial at Sea* the protagonist here has to need something enlightening to transform him into something who changes his perspectives to love and sex. When he comes to know the grim realities of life through the diaries, write-ups of Catherine; when he has to undergo certain changes in life then he goes through transformation in life. The final sentence, a statement, is the paradoxical answer to the first sentence, a statement,--- 518 pages being between them--- and which carries the truth as a paradox does, "Sex is not the greatest glue between two people. Love. . ." (A D: 518)

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(All references are from this edition. Page numbers are given in parentheses after each quotation)

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