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REMINISCENCES OF EARLY LIFE IN OLD AGE IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S THE SUNSET  
CLUB

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the wisdom, life experiences, and the fear of death shared by three old men in Khushwant Singh's novel *The Sunset Club*. The characters in the novel are three friends who are above eighty years of age and who meet every day in Delhi's Lodhi Gardens to celebrate life that they have led, with their personal experiences. The writer, Khushwant Singh proclaimed this work to be his last novel as he had completed ninety-five years of age. This novel vividly portrays the old age experiences of three main protagonists generalising the similar problems faced by all and sundry at this age.

Keywords: reminiscences, old age, humour, death, celebration of life

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INTRODUCTION

Khushwant Singh is one of India's most celebrated writer. He was born in 1915 in Hadali. He got his education from St. Stephen's College, New Delhi and Government College, Lahore. He studied for his LL.B at King's College, London. Though he practiced law for some time, he realised his keenness towards writing. He found *Yojana* and edited the same from 1956 to 1958. In 1958, Rockefeller Foundation and Muslim University, Aligarh, commissioned Khushwant Singh to write the history of sikhs. His acceptance of other religions remains in the fact that he chose a muslim university to do a study on sikh religion. He is an author to a number of great works like *Train to Pakistan* (1956), *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959) and *Delhi* (1989). Being essentially a journalist by profession, he had a proficiency of presenting small incidents with minute details. He has written the present work in his old age. It represents the genre of representing the old age in fiction writing.

THEME OF OLD AGE IN THE SUNSET CLUB

When old look back at their life's journey, they tend to narrate stories of their life forming their own fiction. It marks the way in which the elderly try to make sense of their life through memories and anecdotes. The old and aged suffer from almost same issues such as loss of youthful fervours, the problems of lonesomeness, the fear of impending death etc. W.B. Yeats in his poem *Sailing to Byzantium*, presents a similar picture of an old man in which he says

An aged man is but a paltry thing,

A tattered coat upon a stick.

That the old man is nothing but a paltry thing who wears a tattered coat and holds a stick for walking. Some of the literary works featuring old age as main themes are *Ending Up* (1974) by Kingsley Amis which deals with dying people and ends with children visiting their elders on Christmas and there the story ends ; *Memento Mori*(1959) by Muriel Spark in which the title suggests "Remember you all must die" is a story of elderly Dame Lettie Colston who gets a series of phone- calls by someone unknown giving out the same message; *King Lear* (1606) by William Shakespeare in which the two elder daughters of King Lear describe him as old and remark "You see how full of changes his age is".

The present work, *The Sunset Club* by Khushwant Singh pictures three main characters namely, Pandit Preetam Sharma, Sardar Boota Singh and Nawab Barkatullah Baig. All three of them hail from different religious backgrounds. The trio have been a regular visitor to Lodhi Gardens and have been friends from the past forty years. Now that all of them have attained eighty years of age, they share at the gardens their life experiences , both normal and controversial. The author confesses to having stated memories of his dead friends by mixing facts with fiction.

The novel goes on to narrate the events of a year starting from 26th January, 2009 to 26th January , 2010. The writer dedicates each chapter of the book to the month of the year. The writer describes the different seasons of the year through each chapter. Pandit Preetam Sharma ,the eldest of the trinity is a punjabi brahmin, an Oxford bachelor who held a good position in the Ministry of Education. He lives with his spinster sister, Sunita. The second member of the club is Nawab Barkatullah Baig Dehlavi who is a sunni muslim and married to his cousin, Sakina .He overtly supports the Nehru- Gandhi dynasty. The third member is Sardar Boota Singh who is a replica of Sardar Khushwant Singh himself. He suffers from many infirmities like acute constipation, fluctuating blood pressure, elementary diabetes, enlarged prostate, and stretches of gout. He is called as the ' Rangeela Sardar ' by Sakina due to his passing jest on his gastric issues, his self - glorification in drinking habits, swearing, philandering and his sexual scores.

Activity Theory in Aging points out a conclusive correlation between keeping oneself operative and aging well too. Erik Erikson, who studied the final stages of life held that elderly people aging sixty- five and above try and maintain their ego integrity to realise a sense of completeness and also that they try to avoid any form of melancholy. Sardar Boota Singh shows these traits. He cherishes his old age while thinking on his womanizing proneness of youth. To him , even the Bara Gumbad of Lodhi Gardens bear a cloning to a virgin's breasts.

The reader gets struck by gloom when towards the end of the novel , Sardar Boota Singh opens his telephone book and crosses the name of now deceased Pandit Preetam Sharma and Nawab Barkatulla with the date , month and year of their passing away. Death here, holds a theme central to works corresponding to old age. Whether it be Ulysses of Alfred, Lord Tennyson who in the end is stalked by death because he is old or be it Florentino of *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez who considers death in old age as a bottomless pit, all these characters show the inevitable process of aging, death, and decay. Towards the end of the book, Sardar Boota Singh on knowing about the death of other two friends pulls himself out of despair and goes to Lodhi Gardens , occupying the bench all by himself and gazing at the Bara Gumbad, once again likening it to fully rounded bosom of young woman . It is the celebration of beginning and end ; where life comes to a full circle. As Khushwant Singh quotes Bahadur Shah Zafar 's couplet on death in his book-

"I asked for a long life,  
Only four days were granted:  
Two went in hoping ,  
Two lost in waiting."

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