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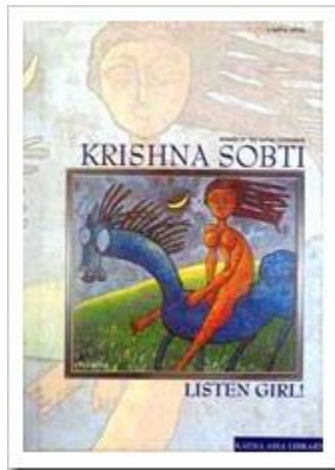
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The Bliss of Life in Sobti's Fiction

Dr. Ashok Verma

Enchanting World!



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“Ladki, this world is absolutely enchanting! ... the games of this world are unique. Magical!” (LG 54) These lines from *Listen Girl!* form the essence of Sobti’s views on life. In fact, Sobti’s characters show a strong penchant for life and therefore take active part in the games of life. The way the veteran author projects various facets of life in their essential beauty and charm, helps the reader view the offerings of this world from a different, refreshing perspective. The beautiful, picturesque world of nature, the flora and fauna, the cycle of creation, human relationships, pulsating humanity with festivals and rituals – all such phenomena fill the writer with sheer joy and leave her enthralled.



Fascination with This World

In fact, all Sobti’s works stand testimony to her fascination with this world as the characters go on celebrating their worldly existence and exhibit an intense desire to enjoy these pleasures and joys of life with their five senses. In one novel after another, Sobti goes on to project this theme as if she, like her characters, were to draw energy out of the well of life to her heart’s fill. She is simply overwhelmed by the myriad games of life and thus wishes to participate actively in them.

Worldly Life versus After Life

Sobti’s views on worldly life give a fresh fillip to the eternal debate as to what kind of life man should lead in this world. Should he believe in the Present and suck the

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marrow of life or he should utilize this life for a better, promising afterlife, i.e., the life after death. Since times immemorial, man has always found himself caught in this dilemma. The instinct goads him to live life as it comes to him; without caring for future whereas social and religious institutions which are inextricably linked to power, tell him to be more concerned with the future. This dilemma is further aggravated by the significant role played by religion in the life of a common man. Be it Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism or any other religious sect – all talk about an afterlife, although there are radical differences in the definition, implication and mode of “afterlife”. The term “reincarnation” is derived from Latin, literally meaning, “entering the flesh again” thus emphasizing the continuity of the soul as against the flesh that perishes.

Hindu Thought and Interpretation

In Indian context, the significance of soul and rebirth forms the very basis of philosophical and religious thought in Hinduism pertaining to human life. *The Bhagavadgita* talks extensively about the soul and afterlife. The famous *shloka*, verse 22 from Chapter 2 in particular, highlights the immutability of soul:

Vaasaansi jirnaani yathaa vihaaya navaani grrihnaati naro aparaani

Tathaa shariiraani vihaaya jir naanyanyaani sanyaati navaani dehii.

(The Bhagavadgita)

In its English translation, the *shloka* mean thus: “Just as a man discards his old clothes and wears new ones, the soul discards the old body and takes on a new one.” In fact, the Hindu way of life centres around the basic idea that the soul never dies; it is indestructible. On the other hand, the body, made of five elements, namely, earth, sky, water, fire and air, is bound to perish. The body is considered to be merely a shell as against the soul which is believed to be immutable and takes on different lives in a cycle of birth, death and re-birth based on karma. The end of this cycle is called *moksha* or salvation – the ultimate goal of man.

It is further believed that the rebirth on this earth is directly affected by the kind of life one leads in this world – the kind of *karma* or the deeds one performs in this life. The *karma* are the accumulated sum of good and/or bad deeds. According to the Hindu belief, the soul leaves the body and reincarnates itself according to *karma* performed by one in the last birth. The social station (caste, etc.) as well as the gender bestowed upon the individual soul based upon acts performed in the previous birth is an important factor here. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that man should do such *karma* in this mortal life as would take him towards overcoming the possibilities and effects of rebirth and attaining a higher social station which could result ultimately in salvation or liberation of the soul.

Almost all religions of the world show allegiance to the theory of salvation, though with some radical differences between the beliefs. It is natural then that all these religious traditions should lay stress on using this life for the accumulation of good acts so as to reap the harvest in the afterlife. In this sense, this life becomes secondary; only a means to attain a fortunate rebirth without any intrinsic worth of its own.

Worldly Life Worth Living on its Own

However, there has been an equally strong undercurrent which gives this worldly life due importance. There have been thinkers in the world in different ages who believe that worldly life is worth living on its own. According to them, it has a sanctity and independence of its own. It has got its own charm and value. As such, it must not be connected to and wasted for an imagined life after death. One must have inclination towards the joys, pleasures and colours which this world offers in plenty. The followers of this principle see human life as bliss and enjoy it. They celebrate their worldly existence and spread a message of happiness, mirth and fulfillment. They clearly advise man to live life king size, enjoy every moment of the present.

Charvak, a great Indian philosopher who propounded one of the six *darshana* or systems of Indian thought, also emphasizes the core idea of enjoying life as it is today:

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*Yavat jeevet sukham jeevet;
Rinam kritva ghritam pivet:
Bhasmi bhutasya dehasya
Puinara gamanam kutah?*

Translated into English, the *shloka* means: As long as you live, live happily. Borrow money and drink *ghee* for the body will be consigned to flames once the soul leaves it. Who knows if there is a reincarnation or transmigration of the soul!

Thus, Charvak's message is pretty simple but clear. Man should make his present happy and comfortable. Putting aside all concerns for the future, he should enjoy life (even though one may question whether borrowing money and drinking *ghee* would really lead to happiness!). Almost similar kind of approach to life has been put forward by the Epicureans who advise people to "eat, drink and be merry."

If Life has Pleasures, it has Many Pains Too!

One particular objection to this kind of philosophy is that it projects a narrow and limited perspective focusing on just the brighter side of life. Life is never a cake's walk. If it has pleasures, it has many pains too. As such, one cannot simply go on borrowing money and drinking *ghee*. The rosy aspect of life is transient. Moreover, we cannot altogether lose sight of our future which is the direct outcome of our present. We have to plan our future otherwise we might land in a pool of troubles, sooner or later.

Life is not all about merry-making; it demands discipline and seriousness which apparently is missing in the followers of this school. The fact remains that there are always two sides of the coin and therefore a balance, a synthesis has to be struck in life without which it is incomplete. This philosophy thus, it is alleged, is tilted towards the worldly joys and merry-making in life.

Humanism

Here it is pertinent to mention the philosophy of Humanism which shows a primary or overriding concern with the needs and abilities of human beings. Its morality is based upon human nature and human experience. It values human life, human beings and their ability to enjoy life. In the words of Beckson and Ganz, *Humanism* refers to “the philosophy which emphasizes the achievement of an admirable human life on earth rather than the preparation for a blissful life hereafter” (85). Fuller, in his *A History of Philosophy* terms it a kind of “pre-occupation with the development of human self-realization here and now, in this world, within the limits set by birth and death” (244). As a typical anthropocentric phenomenon, humanism regards man as the central fact of the universe and interprets everything in terms of man and his values. It seeks to dignify and ennoble man. It regards him as the “crown of creation” Hence humanism involves concern with human needs, human desires, and human experiences first and foremost. Often, it also translates into giving human beings a special place in the universe on account of their abilities and faculties.

Humanism vis-à-vis Other Schools of Thought

Humanism vehemently rejects Divine-dependent view which negates human life in this world and considers it a period of preparation for a better life after death. Again, humanism is against all types of scientism which take the naturalistic methodology of science so as to deny genuine importance or, at times, even reality to human feelings, experiences, and values. Humanism is not opposed to naturalistic explanations of life and the universe. On the contrary, humanists see it as the only viable means of developing knowledge of the world. What humanism strongly opposes are the dehumanizing and depersonalizing tendencies of modern science. One such face of scientism can be overtly seen in the doctrines of utilitarianism in the 19th century well projected in the caricaturistic portrayals of Thomas Gradgrind and Josiah Bounderby in Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*.

Just as the humanists, the materialists also give this life due importance. According to the materialists, the only thing that exists is matter; that all things are composed of material and all phenomena including consciousness are the result of material interactions. In other words, matter is the only substance. Materialism denies the existence of both deities and soul. It is therefore incompatible with most of the religions of the world. Nevertheless, it provides a valid interpretation of this world which appeals to persons believing in the present.

Sobti Favors Humanism

When one reads Sobti's fiction, one realizes at the very outset that the veteran Hindi author obviously favours the humanist stance. She might not be a follower of Epicurus or Charvak immersed completely in merry-making but she is definitely of the opinion that this life is beautiful and worth enjoying. She, in her works, seems to assert that human life is bliss and one has to enjoy it to the full. Once gone from the world, one cannot return to taste the fruits of this mortal world. While reposing deep faith in the Indian philosophy of *karma* and rebirth, she interprets it in her own way to give the present life the place it so richly deserves.

The Storyteller Ammu's Emphasis on This World Life

One must remember the next life, but at the same time must not forget the mortal world. Sobti outright rejects the idea of sacrificing the present life for the imaginary *Baikunth Dhaam* (heaven). Ammu, the old woman of *Listen Girl!*, openly gives vent to the author's strong disapproval of the popular theory which terms this life worthless. The old woman best exemplifies the author's philosophy and in her character both worlds seem to blend perfectly. Surely, there is emphasis on the next world but not at the cost of the present one.

While talking to her daughter, Ammu reiterates the author's viewpoint only: "Who has seen the *Baikunth Dhaam* with his own eyes? Places of pilgrimage for the

living are here, in this world. Nowhere else” (LG 104). Sobti here seems to aver that both the worlds have their own respective importance and human beings should strive for a synthesis between the two worlds. In this way, she does not part ways with tradition while advocating for this human life at the same time.

The Light Will Keep Burning

Deeply rooted in the Indian social and cultural milieu, Sobti does not shy away from her understanding of the Indian way of living and the philosophy of *karma* as propagated in *The Bhagvadgita*. She shows due respect to this viewpoint by expressing her strong belief in the immutability of soul through her mother’s oft-repeated words: “the light will keep burning.” Further, the author describes the ambience of her mother’s room after her death: “And in her room back at home, an earthen lamp burnt day and night, steadily, as if saying that the body perishes, not the soul. For the soul has neither birth nor death” (“On Writing *Listen Girl!*” 7).

Belief in Consonance with *Bhagvatgita*

Such remarks show the author’s firm belief in the existence of the soul. Old Ammu of *Listen Girl!* talks at length about the soul which is in consonance with the philosophy of *The Bhagvatgita*: “This body is a mere garment. Wear it and you’re in this world. Take it off and you’re in another world, away from your own!” (LG 21) These lines run parallel to the *shloka* in *The Bhagvatgita* quoted in the beginning of this chapter wherein the transmigration of soul from one body to the other is compared to changing to clothes. Again, Ammu shows faith in the concept of *moksha* while talking to herself on her deathbed:

All waters pull to the rivers
All rivers to the ocean
So life towards liberation
Mukti! (LG 52)

Parting with Tradition

However, worldly life always enchants the old woman. This is where she parts with tradition. She cannot accept that the present life is an illusion and hence has no real, intrinsic worth. She considers the issue in all earnestness and comes to the conclusion that this life is not worth wasting for the sake of the next life. She would love to live this mortal life in totality. According to her, this life has got its own beauty, charm, vivacity and worth; and as such, it should be given due importance. In one novel after the other, Sobti brings out this feature to the fore. The old Ammu becomes the most powerful representative of this perspective who presents the author's views more forcefully and convincingly than any other of her characters.

On her death bed, the woman has all praises for the worldly life as she shares her thoughts with her unnamed daughter and Susan, the nurse: "Ladki, this is not maya or an illusion. No, no. Life and living are not imagined. It is the leaving of it that is. Is there anyone of flesh and blood who can savour juicy mangoes, ripened on the trees, after his death" (LG 54)?

Hence it is obvious that Ammu, as also the author, is in favour of all that belongs to this mortal world. Sobti's celebration of human existence can be analysed under the broad categories of celebration of the self, joy of worldly existence, deep sense of appreciation for the tastes of the five senses, joy of inter-personal relationships etc. as this categorization would be useful in presenting the broad spectrum of the author's celebration of life.

Sobti Celebrates This World through Her Characters

Sobti, through her characters like Ammu, displays a strong penchant for the worldly pleasures the almighty has showered upon human beings and which they enjoy with their five senses. Be it the seasonal fruit, tasty dishes or a simple, routine drink like tea, she simply relishes the taste of such things. Chewing dry currants she exclaims thus:

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“The last fruit of the season, child. This is joy indeed, sheer joy” (31). This penchant for worldly tastes actually comes naturally to many of Sobti’s characters. Kripanarayan, the male protagonist of *The Heart has Its Reasons* too exhibits the same tendency for the sweets and fruit of Delhi when he records in his red register: “Jamun, Shahtut, phirni, chat-pakodi, bedmi kachauri, rabri khurchan. Ahh! Ghantewala’s pista-lauj” (220).

All these things, when tasted, make the person marvel at the gifts of the Almighty. However the real sense of marvel and wonder for such tastes is noticed in Sobti’s comment in *Zindaginama* when she describes *hukaah* – the Indian smoke pipe – poetically: “With every inhale, the aroma wafts in and the smoke released. O God, your gifts! You’ve bestowed many a *shai* upon the sons of Adam!” (ZN 101)

Celebration of the Ambience

Apart from the joys of tastes, sights and sounds, Sobti’s characters celebrate their surroundings and ambience. To them, this world is beautiful and charming and has so much to offer to us. The natural surroundings also enchant the author immensely and she simply marvels at the creation of such a myriad world by the almighty. Wind, Water, landscapes, rivers, trees, grass and the flora and fauna are live examples of the creative powers God possesses and the author bows to Him in sheer reverence and a sort of thanksgiving. Sobti is thankful to God for having created such a beautiful world and having enabled human beings to relish it in all its colours and shades.



In *Zindaginama*, the writer pays homage to the almighty in the following words: “O God! It’s You who made possible the day and night. It’s You who created this entire Cosmos.” (26) Again, natural beauty of the world in the following onomatopoeic description of heavy rains is wonderful: “The water channels of Rains here, there, everywhere! The hissing rains with dark clouds overcast like the battalions of victors! The clouds thundering threateningly like legions of army! The lightning flashing frequently as if swords!” (ZN 106)

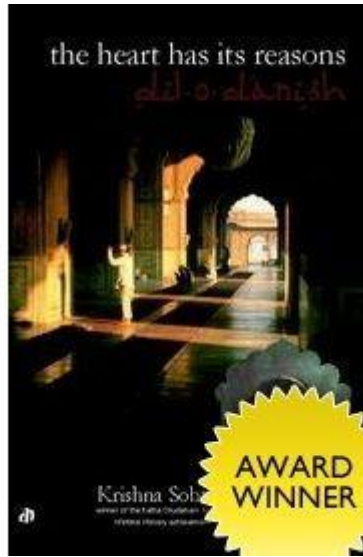
In this way, the world of nature along with its sights and sounds; flora and fauna, remains an integral part of celebration of the joys of life for Sobti’s characters and they are able to strike a harmonious relationship with it. This harmony enables them to respond to natural sights and sounds and gives them inner peace which sees them through all difficulties. They are able to attain that blissful state from where they identify their individual selves to the whole cosmos.

All Good Wishes to the World

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In the novel *The Heart Has its Reasons* also, Sobti's strong penchant for the celebration of one's surroundings gets reflected in Kripanarayan – the male protagonist who on his death bed, in an Ammu-like manner, is able to appreciate his surroundings and ambience. As the reader proceeds with the story of the novel one page after another, the distinct image of Dilli as it was in 1920s, begins to take shape. Farashkhana, Char Burzi Haveli, Jama Masjid, Chandni Chowk, Ghantewala's sweets, Ras Bihari's paan – there are numerous signboards for the reader to fathom even the minute details of the area she describes. This in fact is another characteristic feature of the author's celebration of life. The characters, from their joyful experiences of life, derive a sense of inner satisfaction and contentment which allows them to offer all good wishes to the world. They thus are in perfect harmony with their individual self as well as the whole world. Vakil Kripanarayan's showering blessings upon Dilli and later on the entire world supports this argument:

May God grant that Dilli may never become barren and desolate; may she always reign supreme, her wonders and brilliance intact. May the loving gaze of her myriad inhabitants continue to roam her streets...

May the world, a garden, bloom forever with colour..." (ibid)

Hindu Salvation – Individual Self Merging with the Universal Self

Obviously, such words of praise and good wishes can be uttered by a person who after a rich experience of the worldly life has come to attain a state of contentment where he simply cannot harbour any ill will for anyone. In fact, it is state where the individual self becomes one with the universal self. They are comfortable with themselves and as a result are comfortable with the world. They celebrate themselves and thus, are in a position to celebrate the whole gamut of life.

Walt Whitman and Sobti

Such a state which comes so naturally to Sobti's characters, is closely reminiscent of Walt Whitman's concept of the self. Walt Whitman too seems to celebrate the unified self which has universal relevance. There are many critics who have found a duality in Whitman's concept of the self. This duality, according to them, gets reflected in the conflict between the body and the spirit; the individual and the universal. However, a closer scrutiny of Whitman's concept of the self reveals that beneath this apparent duality, there is underlying oneness. He takes the self to such a level where the parts represent the whole and the whole cannot exist without the parts. It, in fact, is the parts that constitute the whole. V. K. Chari, an important critic on Whitman, while drawing similarities between Whitman's self and Indian mysticism, brings out the unified, monistic nature of Whitman's self. He maintains that it is the organizing principle of Whitman's poetry (62). Whitman in fact visualizes the opposites as essential components of the holistic self. To him, the self is the true meaning and centre of all existence, and that reality is not different from the self.

Sobti also seems to join hands with the American poet to assert the unified, holistic self. It is this realization that makes characters like Ammu, Kripanarayan and many others become so practical and matter-of-fact. They have attained a state of complacency and as such, can understand the patterns of life in a better way.

Ammu, in an almost effortless manner, displays the wholesome attitude towards life. Having lived her life through myriad experiences, she has derived the real substance, the kernel of life, it seems. She has reached a stage where from she can see things clearly, in their essence. She has enjoyed the worldly pleasures to her heart's fill and as such she is in a position to shower her blessings on the world. It however does not mean that her celebration of life is over. She would like to be completely immersed in the play of life till her last breath as she believes that human life is a 'stage' which even gods pine for. Sobti creates wonderful word images to capture Ammu's rapture:

He [her husband] is feeding honey to the child on his lap. Sometimes drops of grape juice. Sometimes he touches the child's lips with a pomegranate seed with such absorption as if there is nothing in this world beyond this play of life. (54)

Sobti's Celebration of All Facets of Human Life

Obviously, in creating such characters as Ammu, the author herself is somewhat involved in celebrating all facets of human life. The life of the 'bipeds' i.e. the human beings thus becomes a fertile topic to talk on and this is exactly what Ammu does. She paints its enormity vividly. Beginning from the process of creation, she successfully creates wonderful word images which leave the reader completely engrossed in the games of life and refresh his views about life.

Be it the process of reproduction, childbearing, childhood or any other aspect of life, Ammu is for it. To her, it is the process of creation rather than mere reproduction which smacks of a mechanical process. She has great respect for motherhood and describes it with an artistic touch. This is something sacred, pure and sacrosanct.

Focus on Motherhood

The following lines reiterate Sobti's deep sense of respect and marvel for motherhood: "Ladki, making a baby is like performing a yajna. During those days, a woman draws energy from the whole cosmos to recharge herself. She feels that special kind of existence that is hers. She watches the skies within her, even as she creates life, becoming one with nature, its textures and rhythms" (55-56).

This description of motherhood is strikingly in contrast with that of Simone de Beauvoir who describes womanhood, in somewhat derogatory terms, focuses on highlighting the problems faced by women. Beauvoir's self-denying, matter-of-fact tone is easily discernible in her assertion that woman is a womb. Here it may be argued that whatever Beauvoir says is valid in view of the plight of womenfolk in a male-dominated world and that she uses such a direct expression in order to rip off the veneer of sophistication and veneration the male world wears towards women.

Possibility of Feminist Objection

The feminists might point out that Sobti's characters have unwittingly internalized the image of woman as propagated by the patriarchs and thus are not aware of their rights. At the same time, however, one must not forget that the same Ammu severely indicts the patriarchal system for its drawbacks. In this way, she adopts a practical stance on the issue. She is not in favour of woman shedding her feminine characteristics and virtues and aspiring to become like man. Woman should recognize her femininity and take pride in it rather than considering it as a burden. What Ammu seems to highlight here is the marvelous, universal fact that only a woman has been endowed with the capacity to give birth to a child. Instead of taking it to be a liability, woman should be proud that she has been given such an important role in the process of reproduction.

The Other Side

Sobti's description appeals to our hearts who gives a poetic description of the process of creation and the roles played by the male and the female in this process. This is something which makes Sobti so special and her interpretation genuine and acceptable. Rohini Aggarwal rightly comments: "Unlike the modern female protagonists of contemporary feminist writers, the woman characters in Sobti do not take motherhood a burden or confine" (37). To them, motherhood is a *yajna*. Be it Ratti, Ammu or Mehak or even Mitro—they all hold motherhood in high esteem and feel blessed in their motherly instincts.

Sobti has all praises for the *janani*—the mother who gives life but at the same time she does not deprive the father of his significant role in the process. The male complements the process by providing the sperm to the egg. She compares the male to a musk deer blessed with the "musk of life". However Sobti beautifully associates this concept of musk deer to the life itself and thus turns the transient into intransient raising the process of reproduction from physical plane to aesthetic heights:

It [man as musk deer] spreads its perfume through this transient world and flits away instantly.

The woman holds this fleeting deer for a few moments and becomes a creator.

This is the play of creation. From her starts the cycle of generations ... an unbroken chain of progeny. (55)

Man-Woman

Falling back on popular Indian myths, Sobti defines man and woman in the light of popular beliefs of the ancient times. She considers the Sun the storehouse of all male energy whereas a woman is like mother earth that receives the energy and creates life out

of it. At another place, Ammu takes pride in belonging to the sacred tradition of creating life and not taking away life.

Similarly, the childhood activities—the first innocent smile, the first ever step taken by a child, its first words uttered in a lisping manner— are a permanent source of joy for Sobti's characters, mothers in particular. Such worldly visions as the following one are a treat to watch: "When for the first time, new earrings are put in the ears of a daughter, she looks very pretty. A tagadi around the little son's waist looks still prettier. And the first innocent smile on the lips of a child is very charming. To see with one's own eyes the first steps of tiny feet is the prize of life, ladki" (LG 54). The novel *Zindaginama* again is fraught with such references wherein children with their innocent, playful activities please the elders beyond measures.

Refreshing Approach

What makes Sobti different from other writers is her refreshing approach towards life which allows her characters pull out strength and energy from the well of life. It is this energy which later on sees them through all problems of life. They emerge as strong characters who boldly face the challenges and are able to take the bull by the horns. Thus Sobti's characters are seen celebrating their worldly life and existence in full spirit. Sometimes this celebration appears to be superficial and short-lived but the basic principle they follow in life is perhaps respecting life under all circumstances. It is their honesty towards their own selves, their sucking-the-marrow attitude, their indomitable spirit, faith in the essential goodness of man that enable them to struggle and survive through all ordeals of life. This attitude makes them comfortable not only with themselves but with the entire cosmos. It further gives them a sense of inner contentment; as such they remain unaffected by the outer turmoil. They thus celebrate their self in a Whitman-like manner and are automatically at harmony with the world.

A True Humanist

The author also emerges as a true humanist for whom preservation of humanistic ideals is first and foremost principle of life. Human life is bliss, a joyous state and one must enjoy it. On the issue of Sobti's approach to life, one may agree with Nirupama Dutt who has all praises for the famous Hindi novelist and says that all novels of Krishna Sobti are "milestones which mark a remarkable journey which seems to converge to the centre point of *Zindaginama*, a saga of love, life and strife told with a truly great flourish."

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