



**ASPECTS OF POWER AND SEXUALITY IN THE
SELECTED NON-FICTIONAL TEXT OF
KHUSHWANT SINGH**

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Abstract:

The article titled “Power and Sexuality in the Selected Non-fictional Text of Khushwant Singh” is an attempt to understand the perspectives of power in the selected text of Khushwant Singh. For this paper, the chosen non-fictional text is *Malicious Gossip* (1989). While talking about the concept of power, Michel Foucault says that ‘power’ is active in all levels of social communication, in all social institutions involving all people. For Foucault, power and knowledge are closely related and support each other. Besides, these concepts construct what is and what is not acceptable in relation to sexuality. According to Foucault, power is not repressive in nature; it is not used as an outside force or authority which restricts the expression of “primal urges” of sexuality from the outside. Rather, he raises a “theory of desire”, according to which desire may appear any time, and apparently including the sexual desire the “power relation is already present.” Thus, power relation is inevitably tied with sexuality. In the book *Malicious Gossip*, Khushwant Singh has dealt with galaxy of characters with their individual traits and the impact of different types of powers over them.

Key Words: Desire, Impact, Power & Sexuality.

Aspects of Power and Sexuality in the Selected Non-fictional Text of Khushwant Singh:

The article titled “Power and Sexuality in the Selected Non-fictional Text of Khushwant Singh” is an attempt to understand the perspectives of power in the selected text of Khushwant Singh. The text which has been selected for this paper is *Malicious Gossip* (1989). Julie By water and Rhiannon Jones in their observation of the idea of power of Michel Foucault state that ‘power’ is active in all levels of social communication in all social institutions involving all people. The crucial aspect of power is felt through the discourse which plays the most significant role. For Foucault, power and knowledge are closely related and support each other. Besides, these concepts construct what is and what is not acceptable in relation to sexuality (5-6).

In the book *Malicious Gossip*, Khushwant Singh has dealt with galaxy of characters with their individual traits and the impact of different types of powers over them. In the first part of the book “To Pakistan with Love”, we find the presence of the so called powers of spiritual thought and socio-political condition in a man’s life etc.

In the story named “From the Death Sentence to the Gallows”; the role of the political scenario in a man’s life is found. The essay narrates the death of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the former Pakistani president. The essay shows how the political situation can impact on the life of a man. It is found that there is a curious paradox in the Pakistani political scene. Most people admit that if Bhutto had been let out of the jail and there would be a free and fair election, his party would sweep the polls. But, at the same time the political analysts think that there is little probability of an impulsive rising in favour of Bhutto. The contradiction is explained in this way: Bhutto was very popular amongst the masses because of his populist slogans he had coined and also the promises he had made to them: “freedom from hunger (roti), a change of clothes (kapda) and a roof over their heads (makan)” (*Malicious* 47). Never the less, the mass knew very well that he had neither the intention nor the means to fulfil these promises. But for the hungry, hate-fed, homeless people the imagination was better than nothing. (*Malicious* 47-8).

To say about Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, he was born in a Rajpūt family that had accepted Islam. He was educated in Bombay and also at the University of California, Berkeley B.A., in the year of 1950. Bhutto studied law at the University of Oxford and then practiced law and gave lectures in England. Upon his return to Pakistan in 1953, he started practicing law in Karāchi. There he was selected as a member of Pakistan’s delegation to the United Nations in 1957. After Mohammad Ayub Khan seized the government in the year of 1958, Bhutto was appointed as the commerce minister and also held other cabinet posts. After his appointment as foreign minister between 1963–66, he started working for liberation from Western powers and for closer connections with China. His opposition to the peace with India after the 1965 war over Kashmir caused him to resign from the government, and in December 1967 he founded the Pakistan People’s Party. Bhutto criticised the “Ayub Khan regime” as a dictatorship and was consequently imprisoned. After the turmoil of the Ayub Khan regime by General Agha Muhammad Yahya Khan, national elections were held in 1970. Although Bhutto and his party achieved victory in West Pakistan, the biggest election winner was the Awami League; an East Pakistan based party that had electioneered for full autonomy for East Pakistan. Bhutto refused to form a government with this separatist party, causing a nullification of the election. The extensive rioting that followed deteriorated into civil

war, after which East Pakistan, with the help of India, emerged as the independent country of Bangladesh.

After West Pakistan's humiliating defeat by India in this military conflict, Yahya Khan turned the government over to Bhutto on Dec. 20, 1971. Bhutto placed his predecessor under house arrest, nationalised several key industries, and undertook the taxation of the landed families in his first acts as president. After the new constitution in 1973 made the presidency largely ceremonial, Bhutto became the prime minister. In both capacities, he had also filled the Cabinet posts of foreign affairs, defence, and interior. His government, retaining martial law, began a process of Islamisation.

Feeling that the public was turning against his rule by decree, Bhutto called for new elections in 1977 to obtain a popular mandate. His party won by a large majority, but the opposition charged him with electoral deception. The government was detained by General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, the army chief of staff, on July 5, 1977. Soon afterward Bhutto was arrested. He was sentenced to death on 18th March, 1978 on the accusation of having ordered the assassination of a political opponent in 1974. Finally, Bhutto was hanged.¹

In the essay it is found that the Pakistani civilians share different views about Bhutto. While on the one hand he is worshiped by a section of people, on the other hand, he is hated also by a large number of citizens. It is found that the urban elite of Pakistan recall his tenure of misrule during which many opposition politicians had been murdered, their families, including their women folk insulted and thousands of innocent men and women put into jail. (*Malicious* 49). The essay ends with the death of Bhutto by hanging according to the verdict of Supreme Court of Pakistan. The power of social body in the life of a man is found active here. As because of certain misdeeds by Bhutto the majority of Pakistani civilians went against him. Finally, he had been dethroned and sent to gallows.

Foucault argues a number of points in relation to power and offers definitions that are directly opposed to more traditional, liberal and Marxist theories of power. Power is not a thing but a relation. Power is not simply repressive but it is productive. Power is not simply a property of the State. Power is not something that is exclusively localised in government and the State (which is not a universal essence). Rather, power is exercised throughout the social body. Power may even operate at the most micro level of social relationship. Power is omnipresent at every level of the social body.²

Singh has expressed his hidden satire while portraying the character of Bhutto. The man who did not hesitate to verdict the murder of many opposition politicians and also insult their family members in different ways, appears to be helpless and also frightened by knowing about his own death sentence by the Supreme Court of Pakistan. Bhutto's helplessness is evidenced through one of his comments: "Marnabahutmushkilh otahai" (dying is not easy) (*Malicious* 56).

While narrating the last journey of Bhutto, the narrator satirically says that all his boldness had gone out of him. He lay on the mattress and went into a kind of coma. Besides, there are different descriptions of what followed. According to one, when after waking up Mr. Bhutto saw the men with handcuffs, "he panicked". He tried various tricks to consume time. He wanted to take bath, write his will, have a cup of tea etc. But all his demands were firmly but politely denied. According to the second description, he refused to be woken up. The Superintendent feared that he might have committed suicide. "But the doctor felt his pulse, heard his heartbeats through his stethoscope and opened his eyelids to make sure that he was alive". In both the descriptions it is found that Bhutto was afraid to die. (*Malicious* 59)

Khushwant Singh while portraying the short biography of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto has shown that it is the state authority which plays a powerful role in defining a man's life. As, during the period, when Mr. Bhutto was in power he verdict of death sentence for many people, so the same fate he had also undergo after getting dethroned. The same state authority has to accept the demand of the social body in the form of Pakistani civilians, those who in their majority went against Bhutto for his misdeeds.

In another story "Pakistan: Sweet and Sour", the role of power of religion in a man's life is found. According to Khushwant Singh, the ban on alcohol is much more of "a farce" in the Islamic republic of Pakistan. In Pakistan, the liquor does not run like the river Ravi, but it is found present in tumblerfuls in most "well-to-do Pakistani homes". A man may have whisky served in a metal tumbler or in a teapot and have to sip it from a china cup. It costs more than twice as much as in India but it may go down twice as well because it tastes of sin (*Malicious* 66). Khushwant Singh's satiric tone is expressed through his depiction mentioned above.

The role of religious belief in the life of man as well as social custom is found evidenced with this reference of wine. Besides, the story also shows how religion may play a gigantic role in the social life of a country. At Lahore, the "morning azaans blare forth in succession from a large number of mosques" enduring for twenty-five minutes, followed by recitations from the Quran. Finally, the incantations from the holy book is overcome with the roar of traffic (*Malicious* 67).

While talking about Foucault's concept of, "Religion" Mark Jordan in his article "Looking for Religion in Foucault" says that religion is not a category that Foucault trusts on for his most important writings. He frequently assumes its usual meanings. He neither projects a fixed essence behind the term nor uses it with a single judgement. Foucault's thinking about what we ordinarily call "religion" moves through other notions:

most frequently ritual but also “ceremony” or “liturgy”, doctrine or dogma, myth or scripture. None of these terms is separated from the supposedly secular. Foucault’s inquiry assumes that religion arises from the issues in the fields of forces inseparable from the rest of human history. What distinguishes it is not some rigid connection with an already separate realm of special entities. Religion is distinguished by how it arranges languages and practices-teachings and rituals-to control this world and the bodies very much in it. Even so, Foucault does not entirely absorb gods and their rites into the everyday life. Bodies are shaped by religious powers, and bodies use religious discourses or practices to resist powers.³

Mitchel Foucault’s concept of micro-mechanism of power is found applicable here. Analysis of micro-mechanism of power also put force to return to the issue of how power is grounded in everyday life. Foucault defined power in a distinctive way, by refusing to reduce it to the negative control of the will of others through prohibitions, he argues against treating dominant forms of social knowledge merely as ideologies legitimating oppressive relations. Foucault contended that such forms of knowledge could only underpin “technologies of domination” over people because they could define a field of knowledge accepted as truth. The production of these “regimes of truth” is the positive aspect of power. (*Gledhill 129-30*)

Religion, being a dominating factor in everyday life extends its power to define the everyday life of a country. The same impact of religion is found again in the story “Plane to Pakistan” the impact of religion in the life of a nation is found with the reference to the Arabic news in Pakistan Radio. According to the writer, “Someone explained to me that this was because the Quran was in Arabic,” (*Malicious 75*). The writer also points out the impact of religion while referring to the circumstantial mullah pressure on the then Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto.

Bhutto succumbed to *mulla* pressure and agreed to make Pakistan a modern Islamic State. But, writes Kureishi, “Islamisation built no hospitals, no schools, no houses; it cleaned no water and installed no electricity. Under the tyranny of the priesthood with the cooperation of the army, Pakistan would embody Islam itself.”(*Malicious 76*)

Besides, the story “War and Cricket” shows that the positive initiative from any side may reduce the enmity between the two sides. The Pakistanis accomplished to keep the initiative always in their hands. Though, Rajiv Gandhi was unwilling to invite Zia to India, “Zia decided to invite himself”. He came with his Begum Sahiba and daughter. They were received by both Rajiv Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi as well. He then went leisurely to Jaipur to watch cricket. (*Malicious79*)

Here, the prime role is played by the power of love. The similar instance is found in the novel *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh. In that novel it is love for humanity and also especially for Nooran which instigates Juggat to save the train to Pakistan at the cost of own life. While commenting on the novel *Train to Pakistan*, S. K. Dubey says that through the sacrifice of Juggut Singh the novelist wishes to tell the readers that the intense desire for violence in men can be fought with the power of love. In fact, it is the power of love which drives the hero of the novel Juggut Singh to prevent the mass killing by laying down his life. It is in love that an illicit man like Juggut finds his actual identity as a human being and cultivates his inner strength of morality to take risk of his life for his love, Nooran. His love for Nooran exceeds from personal to universal as in this process he prevents a massive genocide. Thus it is found that the novelist tries to convey the message that love in men is as deeply rooted as the urge for fierceness. But it is the love which produces strength and courage to face violence with fortitude (34-35).

The second part of the book “Many Faces” includes the short biographies of the eminent personalities of the country. Among those biographies the chosen pieces for this paper are: Rajib Gandhi and V P Singh. Khushwant Singh has portrayed all these characters with their surroundings as well as individual characteristics that become an influential factor in their lives.

While portraying the character of the Rajib Gandhi, Singh brings the impact of the circumstantial pressure from the Congress party workers to make him join politics immediately after his mother’s assassination. In the next few days, Rajib Gandhi was expected to announce his decision to “quit flying and enter politics”. He had no interest in politics rather a very meagre judgement about the politicians. That is why; he was unwilling to change his career. Besides, his wife Sonia too was totally against his joining politics. However, he at last decided to join the party under pressure from the Congress Party members. (*Malicious 83*)

It is in this context that the comments made by J. Murickan S.J. are found important. According to Murickan, power resides not only in the formal organisations, but it also lies in “communities, families and friendship groups”. A person obtains leadership of his friendship group not by any election or appointment but by his sheer ability to influence his peers. Opinion leadership is another informal position of power. Leadership of the expert, of the moneyed, and of the celebrity refers to the informal power. It is not completely absent in formal organisations. Very often organisational activity is controlled by the persons who do not occupy formal positions of authority. The phrase ‘king maker’ is an expression of the presence of such an informal power. (Murickan 6)

Khushwant Singh narrates the character of V. P. Singh, as a powerful orator. Viswanath Pratap Singh has been described “as one of the most competent ministers but by no means the most outstanding in the

Treasury benches". Singh says that there were many others who came as well-equipped as V.P. and quite a few with greater power of oratory (*Malicious* 95). Besides, the writer also mentions about V P Singh's depth of knowledge, a powerful weapon to present the budget in the Parliament. He was Rajiv Gandhi's choice as the Finance Minister in place of Pranab Mukerjee. It was to his credit that the first budget he presented, though totally different from Pranab Mukherjee's way of thinking, was warmly supported and accepted by the industrialists. Even, Nani Palkhivala, a director of Tatas and the country's best-known expert of budgetary finance, who generally always used to find loopholes in almost all the budgets, remained full of praise for V.P Singh's first budget. (*Malicious* 106)

To say about VP Singh, he came off in a Rathore Royal Family of Manda to Raja Bhagwati Prasad Singh of Daiya and was later adopted by Raja Bahadur Ram Gopal Singh of Manda in 1936, whom he succeeded in 1941. V. P. Singh studied at Colonel Brown School, Dehradun for five years, and entered local politics in Allahabad during the Nehru era. He soon made a name for himself in the state Congress Party for his unfailing rectitude, a reputation that he would carry with him throughout his career. He was appointed by Indira Gandhi as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1980. As the Chief Minister, he took severe action against robbery or banditry problems, which were rampant in the rural districts of the south-west. He achieved tremendous national publicity when he offered to resign following a self-professed failure to stamp out the problem, and again when he personally directed the surrender of some of the most feared dacoits of the area in the year of 1983.

Called to the Centre following Rajiv Gandhi's massive mandate in the 1984 General elections, V P Singh was appointed as the Finance Minister. During his term as Finance Minister, he managed the reduction of gold smuggling by reducing gold taxes and the excellent tactic of giving the police a portion of the smuggled gold that they found. He also gave extraordinary powers to the Enforcement Directorate of the Finance Ministry, a wing of the ministry charged with tracking down tax evaders, then headed by Bhure Lal. Following a number of high-profile raids on suspected evaders, including Dhirubhai Ambani and Amitabh Bachchan; Rajiv Gandhi terminated him from the post of Finance Minister, probably because most of the raids had been conducted on industrialists who had supported the Congress economically in the past.

Besides, V P Singh also began to investigate the dark world of defence procurement. After a while, a rumour spread that Singh had possessed information about the Bofors defence deal that could tarnish the Prime Minister's image. Before he could have act on that, he was dismissed from the Cabinet. Then, he resigned from the Congress Party as well as the Lok Sabha. Together with associates like, Arun Nehru and Arif Mohammad Khan, Singh formed an opposition party named the Jan Morcha. He was re-elected to the Lok Sabha in a tightly contested by-election from Allahabad, defeating Sunil Shastri. On 11th October 1988, the birthday of Jayaprakash Narayan, the Janata Dal was formed by merger of Jan Morcha, Janata Party, Lok Dal and Congress (S), in order to bring together all the centrist parties opposed to the Rajiv Gandhi government, and V. P. Singh was elected as the President of the Janata Dal. A federation of the Janata Dal with various regional parties including the DMK, TDP, and AGP, came into existence, called the National Front (India), with V. P. Singh as convener and N. T. Rama Rao as President.

The National Front fought the elections in 1989 after coming to an electoral understanding with the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party and the Communist Left Front that served to unify the anti-Congress vote. The National Front, with its allies, earned a simple majority in the Lok Sabha and decided to form a government. The Communists and the BJP declined to serve in the government, preferring to support it from outside. In a dramatic meeting in the Central Hall of the Parliament on 1st December, V. P. Singh proposed the name of Devi Lal as Prime Minister, in spite of the fact that he himself had been clearly projected by the anti-Congress forces as the 'clean' alternative to Rajiv and their Prime Ministerial candidate. Devi Lal, a Jat leader from Haryana stood up and denied the nomination, and said that he would wish to be an 'elder uncle' to the Government, and that Singh should be the Prime Minister. Singh served the nation as Prime Minister for less than a year, from 2nd December 1989 to 10th November 1990. In the character of V P Singh, the role of the power of knowledge is found present. It is this power of knowledge that enabled him to become a successful parliamentarian and also as the Finance Minister.

One of the most important features of Foucault's view is that mechanisms of power produce different types of knowledge which collate information on people's activities and existence. The knowledge gathered in this way further reinforces exercises of power. Foucault contradicts the idea that he makes the claim 'knowledge is power' and says that he is interested in studying the complex relations between power and knowledge without saying that they are the same thing. Power and knowledge involve one another. For Foucault, power and knowledge are not seen as independent entities but are inextricably related-knowledge is always an exercise of power and power always a function of knowledge.⁴

In the fourth as well as the last part of the book named "Around the World" part of the book which is a series of essays the writer has brought the different aspects of power generated from various aspects of our surrounding. Among the essays those which have been chosen for discussion are 'Indonesian Fortnight', 'Polonaise', and 'In Gaddafi Land'.

In the story 'Indonesian Fortnight' Khushwant Singh has presented the socio-cultural scenario of Indonesia. He has presented the role of sexuality as he found during his visit. Singh has compared the fertility of the soil with that of the women who can produce many children.

Unfortunately, its women are equally fertile and produce more mouths than the earth can feed. There is something about the rice-n-fish diet which makes men more randy and women more fecund. (*Malicious* 159)

The narrator has also found that in Indonesia there is free mixing between males and females. Hence, molestation of women or "eve teasing" hardly exists there. That is why, he has reached the decision that fascination with sex has healthier outlets in Indonesia than that have in India.

Obsession with sex, which Lubis so deprecates, seemed to me to have healthier outlets in Indonesia than we have in India. , molestation of women or "eve teasing", as we call it, hardly exists because men and women mix as freely as they do in Western countries. (*Malicious* 160)

The author's satirical tone is found here. Indonesia, being a Muslim dominated country, is liberal in the matter of sexual free mixing which is against the Islamic conservatism. In Indonesia, there is a famous festival called Pon. It is a surprising sexual triumphant ritual taking place on the island of Java. In Indonesian tradition is a celebration called Pon. The event takes place seven times a year and during the celebrations, revellers will climb up Gunung Kemukus, a hilltop Islamic shrine, found on the island of Java to join the holy ceremony to ensure good luck and fortune by having sex. Participants in the festival of Pon, have to spend the night at the top of the mountain and have sex with a stranger if they want good luck and fortune to befall them in future. Besides, this tradition holds the view that this will only work if they have sex with the exact same person all seven times throughout the year during Pon. The ceremonial includes offering prayers and flowers at the grave site of Pangeran Samodro, one of the sons of a Javanese king. Participants have to wash themselves in a sacred spring and then find a stranger to do the Sexual intercourse.⁵

William Dale in his article "Foucault's Sexuality" says that, Foucault begins his "analytics" with a description of sexuality as "a dense transfer point for relations of power...endowed with the greatest instrumentality" and a "linchpin for the most varied strategies." To interpret this a bit, he seems to be isolating his argument from a reference to the biological and psychological phenomenon, such as drives and centering it on the discourse of sexuality over time. This discourse forms the metaphysical ground from which "sexuality" emerges as an important location for the relationship of power and knowledge. "Sexuality" is an arena for the game of power and knowledge relationships among the multiple actors. Four "strategic unities" emerge from the two century discourse on sexuality, according to Foucault. These unities formed "mechanisms" within the flux of power and knowledge. These unities "gained effectiveness" in power relations and showed "productivity" in knowledge relationship, thus becoming the "privileged objects of knowledge." The accords each have a model representative: 1) the hysterical woman, 2) the masturbating child, 3) the Malthusian couple, and 4) the perverse adult. Foucault sets the stage for offering his "analytics of power." He does this by revealing what he sees as the conventional account of power, a flawed account he exposes in order to dismiss it in favour of his own substitute. He first asserts that, different to the usual account, power is not repressive in nature; it is not used as an outside force or authority which restricts the expression of "primal urges" of sexuality from the outside. Rather, he raises a "theory of desire", according to which desire may appear any time, and apparently including the sexual desire the "power relation is already present." Thus, power relation is inevitably tied withsexuality.⁶

While on the one hand Singh has expressed his satirical view as mentioned above, in the subsequent pages of the story he has presented the impact of religion in the formation of socio-cultural life of the nation. The author says that in every sunset, the Indonesian TV network relays "the call to prayer with words of the azaan in Arabic and the Bahasa translation" is also there with a succession of Indonesian scenes at twilight time. There is silver-domed mosques and minarets at every little village and town. Besides, it is rare that a person is not stopped on the way by groups of boys collecting donations to build new mosques. While on the one hand, Singh provides the picture of such a religion- dominated society, on the other hand he brings the satirical tone by refereeing to the existence of the beer bar at every street corner of the Islam-dominated country. (*Malicious*162)

The same impact of religion is also found in the story 'Polonaise'. Though there has been ruling by Comrade Gomulka and his commissars with their iron hands, communism could generate very little enthusiasm among the common people. Besides, inspite of Marxist propaganda that "religion was an opiate", (*Malicious* 169) the public seemed to have generated a longing for assembling in the churches. Furthermore, it is from the grand reception of the Pope that it has been cleared that the impact of religion on the mass people is more than that of communism. The tussle between the state-power and the religious authority is witnessed here with again a satiric tone that the religion is more deep rooted in the life of a nation than any other political ideology.

The Poles remained free of taint of either ideology; the tumultuous welcome they gave to the Pope last year left no doubt in anyone's mind that the Catholic Church in Poland is stronger than Communism. (*Malicious* 169)

The story 'In Gaddafi Land' the impact of the state-power is found active in moulding the socio-political life of the country. While talking about Gaddafi, Khushwant Singh says that:

He outbid Israel and brought over Idi Amin for the Muslim world and gave large sums of money to Black dictators in the hope of converting them to Islam. He sent arms and money to Pakistan for use against India in the Bangladesh War of Independence and is known to be the chief financier of Islamic bomb. All these exercises cost Libya a lot of money and earned him many enemies. (*Malicious*235-36)

Khushwant Singh, in the story also says that though for a short span of time, Gaddafi's effort in the propagation of Islam was appreciated by the Muslims, but soon the Saudis, Egyptians and Syrians came to regard him as a man "dangerously disturbed". Khushwant Singh uses his sense of humour in the form of hidden satire when he says that while most outsiders regarded Gaddafi as a Muslim fanatic, the chief opposition within his country came from the mullahs who used to believe that Gaddafi was "too modern". (*Malicious* 236)

Singh also says that though there have been around sixteen deadly attacks on the life of Gaddafi, but he is not frightened. "Once, two bullets missed his heart by a few inches" (*Malicious* 238). But the dictator continues to appear in public all the time. Every month he manages to cover most of his vast country to see how things are going. Here, Khushwant Singh stresses on the power of characteristic stamina as well as bravery which enables Gaddafi to carry on his ruling overcoming various difficulties.

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