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"Streets of a new Time": The Elderly and the City in Krishna Sobti's *The Music of Solitude*

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Abstract:

This paper looks at *The Music of Solitude* (2019), an English translation of the novel *Samay Sargam* (2000) by Krishna Sobti. Living in the city is an experience of isolation and socialisation. Sobti's novel studies the city of Delhi and its inhabitants through the eyes and lives of two old and elderly individuals, Aranya and Ishan, as they witness the changes in urban demography, human relations and a silent violence affecting everybody's life. The question of everyday marginalisation and invisibility is explored in the paper, where issues of age, (un)employment and urban survival get highlighted. People live in apartments without their families. The two protagonists, Ishan and Aranya, live alone in their respective houses and often meet to talk about life and work in the urban life of Delhi. This paper explores a basic premise that every individual's perception of life and living is valid yet subjective, struggling between meaning and non-sense, centrality and shadows, the 'old' and the 'new'. Within the urban spaces and this urban existence, Krishna Sobti's novel aims at highlighting the paradoxical search for islands of familiarity amidst a sea of anonymity.

Keywords: Krishna Sobti, Elderly, City, Development, Isolation

Introduction:

"The old order still prevails under the guise of the new…the changes of yesteryear will merge with the new, and the new will also begin to age" (98).

Dwelling on the 'new' and the 'old', Krishna Sobti's *Samay Sargam* (2000)[i] is a novel which uses the metaphors of time, rhythm and music to unravel an urban existence at the turn of the millennium, marked by isolation, freedom and fear. With her characteristic astuteness and empathy, Sobti weaves together some pertinent questions around old age, gender, family, urban spaces, death, and money. She posits her discourse from a demographically different viewpoint, a class of people who can now reflect more and act less. The noise and speed of the world is carefully kept at bay by seeking recourse to introspection. Sobti studies the city as a field of interactions between objects and individuals as they enter into a conversation while traversing the streets of the mind and the city.

The novel creates a collage which enables the reader to observe both the 'ideal' of life and the actual practices of living, amid the harmonious and discordant rhythms of the city. As elderly neighbours living on their own in the same residential society in Delhi, Aranya and Ishan witness their lives against the backdrop of a changing city, a changing value-system and a changing sense of self. Even though they occupy the realm of an intellectual, upper-middle class and engage largely in dialogues and deliberations, they struggle to keep pace

with the markers of modern living like structure, order, hierarchy, agility and precision. Despite the differences in their ideologies and way of living, what keeps Aranya and Ishan together is an understanding that beyond individual dissimilarities, a human bond must be sustained to counter the uncertainties that life throws at each one of us. As Ishan says, "the amount of water left in our pitchers is enough for the evening of our lives… we've lived our times, spent them. Why not live the bit that remains wholeheartedly?" (160).

Any change in society often induces a duality: a rational desire to explore and experiment, and an emotional need to cultivate nostalgia. Aranya and Ishan give us a relationship that balances itself on this fine line; between past and present, traditional and modern. From the mindscape of an elderly Aranya, the narrative flows in and out like an unbroken thread connecting experience, memory and anxiety. Living alone in her apartment gives Aranya the sense of independence, along with a critical distance from the institution of the family. But it makes her susceptible to forgetfulness, theft and deception. And this coexistence of contraries seems to be the defining feature of Aranya's urban existence.

It is only through her unlikely friendship with Ishan that the story can focus on that stage in our lives when the passage of time and memory becomes inverse to the hurried movements of the external world. And through their conversations and inner monologues, Sobti addresses several issues: What does an evolving urban space offer to its elderly after they have stopped 'working'? What determines the State's notion of productive and unproductive populace? And how the elderly can still be at the receiving end of familial violence and neglect. Aranya and Ishan's discussions are a major comment on the idea of living and longing in an urbanscape, and how literary narratives, in myriad ways, record an individual's history of existing in a changing urban milieu with shifting class and gender relations. What emerges is a slow-paced narrative which looks at the means through which an individual adjusts to the inevitable forces of time and history, with the city of Delhi as its backdrop.

Reality, Language, Identity

The language of the novel and the utterances of the characters possess a reflectiveness that contradicts the confusion and bustle of city-life. A contemplative life is one way of adjusting to a modern way of life without succumbing to it. Ishan looks at the world through the lens of self-knowledge, inner journey and soul-searching. Aranya abides by the narrative of human rights, science and criticality. Ishan speaks with an inward gaze and finds in Aranya a denouncement of all things sentimental and familial. Aranya reflects an assertiveness that counters and complements the wanderings of Ishan's mind. She displays resilience, despite her moments of doubt, self-centeredness and anger. Their mutuality is so well established, and moments of vulnerability so well crafted, that both Aranya and Ishan feel blessed to have each other's acquaintance in the midst of a city that is ever-changing in its contours and composition.

Identity, time and memory is often the focus of their discussions. As she sat one evening to have tea, Aranya "placed the tea tray in front of herself, and then drank the tea, regarding herself as a guest. An actor, onlooker, audience, guest, host, all rolled into one" (12). She tells Ishan that "there are several editions of me. They can't be seen all the time. But when they surface, they take aim at me with lost weapons" (49). When our society allows women to live on their own, it silently imposes upon them multiple roles and multiple selves. And this can

get both enabling and disruptive. Just like during one of their walks in the city's parks, Aranya points to a flower, identifying it as "rose-daughter". When Ishan asks if there might be some "feminist influence working on this identification", Aranya says, "Sons form the majority in this park. We worry about the minorities. That's why it's so important to note the existence of daughters" (9).

A realisation occurs that time has been moulding an individual all along. An external, chronological time in the shape of calendars, watches, schedules, and timetables. And an internal time which is boundless, oscillating between what has been and what is to be. As somebody who sees this both in herself and nature, Aranya often observes the "small and middling plants engrossed in the business of drawing in sunlight and air. The traffic on the street whizzing past, oblivious of all this" (4). There is an internal time which exists as felt images and sounds stored over the course of one's lifetime. The external time is the ruthless, cut-and-dried creation catering to the needs of an external entity. This knowledge enables an individual to access the realities of their time. Sobti highlights that it is the internal time which sustains an individual with its profundity and depth. Most of our lives are spent ignoring this wisdom, as we bear the burdens of external time and routine.

Professions, Markets and the City

Nothing defines routine better in the urban milieu than the idea of a 'lifestyle'. Major markers include an individual's economic drive, sense of competition and concern for survival. This induces a change in the network of human relations, sociability and community, radically altering the fabric of society. Aranya reminiscences about the economic freedom she had when young. "The clock would strike five and the headaches of office would be shut away in the drawer for the next day" (42). She re-lives the bliss to be a working, earning woman indulging in Connaught Place, the Embassy, Nirula's, Maidens, Gaylord. This is the newly-emerging culture of sitting and eating out, as spending and exploring is made accessible primarily through one's earnings. The market responds to newer demands, be it of formal clothing, indulgent eating, round-the-clock beauty or status-quo leisureliness. Aranya contributes to this sentiment when she remembers, "New Delhi's salaried class and its mores, caught in a tussle with each other. A glance always fixed on the metre of expenses and small and big wishes respected accordingly" (43).

But this indulgence created its own repercussions. While the middle-class spending rose and fell in keeping with the times, a politico-economic destitution emerged. It was visible in the mushrooming of *jhuggis*, garbage heaps, smog, monotony, theft and penury. One rainy afternoon, Aranya steps out for a walk and sees "a tangled cluster of *jhuggis*". She looks at the tarpaulin and the tunnel within which families sustain themselves. She hears a baby crying and imagines that in this rain the mother would have so much to manage. The language of Aranya's thought defines the baby in terms that highlight the precariousness of his existence. She asks a series of questions to herself as she confronts a reality which she knew of but had never encountered in such close quarters. She wonders if this "Abhimanyu (will) be able to escape his *chakravyuh*"[ii] **(ii)**. What does this "sobbing" child, in a "dripping…leaking" tent, have to look forward to? What lies ahead of are the dangers of "narcotics", the elusive "clean brick house", the leisure of the "Sunday flea market", the future of "a hero or a villain". The metaphor of a self-defeating *chakravyuh* is all she can see as the child's destiny.

But it is interesting because the *chakravyuh* does epitomise the real nature of everybody's existence amidst the forces of capital, power, money and discrimination. The 'new' is just a re-fashioning, a re-birth, and we see Aranya often reminding herself that the past "got lost somewhere in the geography of this city" (42). She gives us the post-independence reality, when "community after aggressive community of the displaced belligerent refugees uprooted from villages, qasbas and towns" almost swept over the landscape, culture and taste of Delhi like "dust storms" (43). And the city began to look different. Alongside Nirula's and Embassy, the pavements of the city became the lodgings of migrants. "Stoves were lit on the pavements and dal and rotis began to be made there", and with the passage of time "we, young citizens of yesteryears, were transformed into the senior citizens of today…Ancient us in new times" (44). This becomes the crux and the conflict of an urban existence, where geography and individual identity cause each other to be transformed, and this is where Aranya is no different from the nameless pavement dwellers. All will undergo a self-fashioning and eventually "the truths of consumerism will increase, and belief in relationships shall decrease" (98).

Self, Family, Society

The Music of Solitude, an English translation of 'Samay Sargam', reveals the modern times to be the harbinger of an inevitable loneliness. Sobti explores solitude through Aranya and Ishan, who stay away from their families or don't have any. Early in the novel, when Ishan visits Aranya's apartment, he is overcome by the silence. "We can hear the silence because we live alone" (64) says Aranya. Ishan inquires if this life ever makes Aranya anxious. He focusses on the need of a family, an intimate group that one can come back to. In response, Aranya delineates the politics of joint and nuclear families, the banalities and necessities of family life, and the confidence of enjoying one's own company and relishing the self. She says that she has "tune(d) out the *tanpura* of family tales…(beginning) to appreciate the calm of staying away from the tensions that underlie the superficial harmony of family life" (66).

Here Sobti voices some of the deepest concerns around family, equality and filial love through Aranya's articulations. She is clear and sharp about her observations on families, based on discussions with "working class girls" and others. Money defaces relationships immensely, till they become unrecognisable. And the degraded family continues to function as a hollow entity driven by monetary benefits and transactional value. She explains to Ishan that "having dominance in joint families has to do with the individual's capacity to generate money" (66). She reveals that "the collective wealth of the family is managed like a business enterprise…Being committed to such a family structure has to do with wealth and prosperity". Aranya emphatically asks, "Is there any point, Ishan, in glorifying the kind of protections which scrape away at your self-confidence?" (68).

The novel beautifully shows that amidst these forces of possession and exploitation, the gender dynamics between women get impacted. Sobti does not shy away from depicting women in varied roles: some eschewing in their rightful share of property, others acting in connivance with their husbands to marginalise the in-laws, and a third group which earns to move out of their families and live an independent life. Aranya lays bare the functioning of some households where life as a woman itself is at stake, and her identity is throttled at the behest of patriarchy, collective respectability and social status. Aranya's vision is radically different and egalitarian. Men and women must "face each other… go as equals, in

partnership…Will patriarchy continue to uphold itself, and matriarchy continue to flow away? Will women ever have a right to the knowledge of *brahma*?" (70). In her questions lies the critical gaze towards both the past and the present, the past which made certain knowledge inaccessible to women, and the present which continues to disempower and disengage women from coming into their own right.

The novel gives us examples of this familial disregard of elderly members at the hands of brothers, sons and daughters-in-law. At different moments in the text, Ishan and Aranya visit friends and see the pain present in the lives of women who have been held hostage, emotionally and physically, by their own families. The characters of Damayanti and Kamini, among others, show us that Aranya's expressions do find an echo in the lives of well-educated upper class women too. In spite of their brilliant past, the demise or absence of a husband/son renders these women so helpless. Aranya usually asks these women to stay strong, but deep within she feels she cannot do anything for them.

Damayanti had been "attractive, bubbly and energetic" (74), and is as elegant and beautiful when she meets Ishan and Aranya. Cooped up in her room, she is not allowed to entertain her guests in the living room of the house that is hers by every right. On Aranya's encouragement, when they all sit in the living room, Damayanti has to face the ire of her son. The anger is so palpable that she requests Aranya to not leave her alone. "My son is ruthless. He'll keep at it all night" (82), she says. As they shake hands and say goodbye, Aranya wonders, "Do fathers, husbands, sons, still hold the strings of (a mother's) person and her existence?" (82). Damayanti dies a month later, and the reasons are obvious to Ishan and Aranya. The elderly Kamini's story is much the same. Her brothers, in collusion with Kamini's domestic help Khuku, are slow-poisoning her and have already taken her property and the documents. Kamini is half-alive when Ishan and Aranya meet her. She barely recognises them and is almost aware of the deception that even a professional, well-earning woman like her could be subjected to. Aranya writes, "After seeing Kamini, I find myself questioning everything around me" (111).

The stories of Damayanti and Kamini reveal the brutal modes of survival that modernity and money have introduced into people's lives and the cold-hearted devaluation of the human being into an object, alienated from the self and others. Amidst the shifting structures of the family and diminishing spaces which accommodate them, women are losing the battle by virtue of their gender and social mores, in spite of being earning members of the family. Aranya notes that "one's rights shrink with time…The warmth and oppression of the family, both come at once…Then there is shortage of space…(and) two generations have to somehow make do with each other" (120). And this adjustment will extend to the global community, as the culminating lines of the novel reveal. In their conversations with one Angelika from Amnesty International, Ishan and Aranya discover that there are talks of world powers setting up habitation in outer space, while the earth will be populated by the poor alone. And in this desire for technology, power and consumption, the missing component will clearly be humankind.

Individual Tunes, Collective Rhythms

Vasudha Dalmia, the translator of this novel, calls the story's characters and the city as a "palimpsest" (170), a re-writing, a composite narrative of Delhi and its inhabitants. In the

intertwining of varied hues and melodies, Krishna Sobti's *Samay Sargam* narrates the felt experience of living in the city in the turn of the millennium. In choosing to focus on the elderly men and women living in the city, the novel raises questions that are pertinent even today: How does an individual inhabit a space and time which renders them unproductive? How do the 'senior citizens' wrestle with the meaning of their life and longings while adjusting to the growing needs of a relatively younger and faster consumerist class?

An entire psycho-social structure is revealed through the words of Aranya and Ishan, and the spaces they visit and inhabit. It reveals the experience of modernity, a 'new' way of life, and a sensibility which has never been seen before, through the eyes of a generation which grasps this present as an outcome of a chequered past. The characters become the best witnesses to the processes of growth since their gendered identities interact with every social, economic and cultural process. Aranya puts it poignantly, "our body is evidence of all the experiences we have known and lived. I am not only me. I am also all that I have assembled in myself" (58).

And quite like the individual, even the city is permanently displaced and immensely expansive, with all its dwellers, the marginalised and the flotsam. In the words of Michel de Certeau, the city sets into motion a "mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one" (7). Sobti, Aranya and Ishan show how it is an open field which one can walk through, converse with, and emerge out of, in ways that defy arbitrary categorizations.

End Notes:

[i] This paper is based on *The Music of Solitude* (2019), an English translation of Krishna Sobti's novella *Samay Sargam*.

Originally published in Hindi by Rajkamal Prakashan in 2000, it was translated by Vasudha Dalmia into English. The first English translation was published in 2013.

[ii] The word, with its imagery borrowed from the Mahabharata, refers to a situation when an individual feels entrapped from all sides, with no way out and an inevitable defeat/surrender. It refers, primarily, to a militaristic concentric formation used to surround and annihilate the enemy.

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