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**R. K. Singh: The Poet Who Celebrates 'senses' to attain 'Nirvana'**

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**Abstract**

This paper discusses a few of R.K.Singh's characteristic poetic traits that make him stand apart from all his contemporary Indian poets writing in English. His poetry is an honest attempt to portray the contemporary world in its true hue and color; present an inside-out delineation of the modern man; and touch upon all the so-called 'untouchable' i.e., topics such as 'Sex', 'Prostitution', 'Cultural Degradation', 'Stinking Politics', 'Religion', etc. Reader finds Singh celebrating all his senses in his 'unique' attempt to attain the state of complete 'Peace' or 'Calm'. His poetry serves as a medium for him to reach the state of 'nirvana'. Reader finds Singh's poetry as a prism that diffracts the worldly affairs into different spectrums, analyses each, and again sums it all into a single hue of liberation and peace with 'detachment' displaying the mark of a seasoned 'yogi'. The paper aims to encourage other researchers and people in the academia to explore recent band of emerging Indian poets expressing themselves in English.

**Key Words:** Poetic traits, brevity, sensual imagery, social consciousness, existential concern, degrading values, politics, spirituality.

A professor, a critic, a social enthusiast, and to add to all, a poet widely acclaimed for his 'offbeat' poetry, R K. Singh, is a respected name in the domain of Indian writing in English. He is popular among academia for his minute observations and crisp critique. Starting his career as a journalist, he turned to be an ESP practitioner, and from there emerged a poet known for his brevity, wit, erotic imagery, poetic consciousness, sensuous references, irony, satire, and subtle expressions. Smearing his ink for over three decades now, R. K. Singh has made a remarkable contribution to Indian poetry in English. Reader can see the maturity that he achieves, as an intellectual, through his poetic journey. His poetry has always been a mirror to his surroundings, at the same time, a reflection of his inner self as well. It depicts his life-journey to such an extent that Singh himself admits:

Apparently without a pattern, artificially arranged, and untitled, each poem is an experience independent of the rest, and complete, though continuous in spirit. Short and shorter snapshots of daily life, at times unusual but not without depth, it reveals my growth of mind and style. (Singh, 2)



R. K. Singh has never been shy or scared while expressing his experiences, though very personal, and professing his viewpoints. He never tries to hide himself behind the veil of societal considerations. His early poetry displays a strong erotic atmosphere although he hails from a small town of Varanasi that is one of the most revered places of Hindu pilgrimage. His poetry clearly manifests that he never tries to control his pen, the pen being the master and he just a means. His early poetry is guided by his fascination towards love and sex, which goes in melody with his age. It reflects his inner cravings and experiences explicitly. Singh writes about very intimate experiences that seem to be strikingly idiosyncratic but at the same time appear as experiences of others. He displays remarkable artistry as he can transmit personal experiences as impersonal. The later phase of his poetic journey reflects a close association with the surroundings and the ways of the contemporary world. Here, Singh appears to be a social commentator, who shouts at the peak of his voice, but remains unheard.

Singh has always believed in flying free, therefore, he never tied himself down to any school of thought or poetic style. He loves to experiment with the established norms of poetry, and in the process, stands apart from his contemporary practitioners of Indian poetry in English. He never comes between 'R. K. Singh-the poet' and his 'audience' to maintain complete alienation from the readers, he goes to the extent of not suggesting even a suitable title to his poems.

Singh gives his readers a complete freedom to flex their neurons and explore new possible meanings from his texts and what would be a better example than the following poem:

Reader finds R. K. Singh glued to sensual images and erotic symbols to such a great extent in the beginning of his poetic journey that he even attempts to define 'poetry' as:

The best poetry is a woman  
concrete, personal, delightful  
greater than all (Singh, 139)

In the above quoted lines, reader finds that Singh has interblended 'poetry' and 'woman' as if:

'poetry' is just a derivative of a 'woman' or 'woman' is in fact 'poetry' personified. It appears as if Singh has only two things to live upon, i.e., 'woman' and 'poetry' as he adds: "Woman is the flesh / and spirit of poetry / eternal love thirst" (Singh, 70).

This concept of 'woman' and 'poetry' is further strengthened in the lines: "A woman / in poet's vision / howsoever strange / is ever new" (Singh, 72). Singh admits in one of his interviews given to Kanwar Dinesh Singh, published in *New Indian English Poetry: An Alternative Voice*: "Woman in my poetry...is a universal woman, the invisible part of the primordial pairs we know as *Purush* – *Prakriti*, or *Yin-Yang*, unchanging over time and culture" (Sharma). In simple words, it can be claimed that 'Poetry' and 'woman' are indispensable to Singh. In the given context, R. S. Tiwary aptly remarks: "Woman is the chief source of his (R. K. Singh's) creative afflatus; woman not as an imaginary angel but woman in her all corporeal riches..." (Tiwari).



The concept of 'erotic' (derived from the word 'Eros') broadens its spectrum in case of Singh. The reason behind the same may be understood to be his deep understanding of the *Rig-Veda's* concept of '*Kama*' which is, undoubtedly, more comprehensive. Singh shares proximity with Vatsyayan when it comes to celebrating 'Sex' and 'Union' in his poems. Vatsyayan in his masterpiece *Kamasutra* defines sex as an act of extraction of pleasure through the five senses in communion with soul. Singh projects sex in the context of human life having a wider significance as it is not only limited to physical sensation but also expands to the mental horizons. His poems explicitly depict that in sex, people look for mental pleasure, contentment and satisfaction that arises from bodily union and pleasure. Thus, the desire of physical communion is generally combined with a desire to savour beauty, and Singh explores it to the full. Eroticism oozes out of the poetry of Singh where the woman and her beauty are presented as a means of attraction and arousal, as well as from the depiction of carnal communion between man and woman. It wouldn't be misleading to state here that R. K. Singh's poetry celebrates body and glorifies sex and sexuality as basic truths of life. It may be argued that R. K. Singh explores the dimension of spirituality in the beauty and nudity of woman. He finds feminine charm capable of leading one to the attainment of spirituality as nearness to woman makes him feel "blessed" and "nearer God."

The 'erotic' in Singh's poetry often transverses beyond the aesthetic zone to reveal the inherent hypocrisy, selfishness, and corruption of human behaviour leading towards the social and moral downfall. It is with this purpose that the poet uses sex imagery and contexts. Singh is a poet who has the calibre of addressing even the most serious issues with his easy flowing 'sensual' and 'erotic' imagery, as one finds in:

To express sex  
a crowd is convenient in the bus during the  
Puja he rubs hard his cock against the ladies'  
bottoms before turning wild gets down  
at Sabuj Samaj to search a new outlet in the  
Pandal (Singh, Poem No 12)

What would be a better depiction of 'eve-teasing' and 'molestation' observed during the festive season under the guise of religion. It truly depicts and hints at the sexual exploitation of women at different places, either it be in public or in private such as '*ashrams*', '*churches*', and '*educational set ups*'. Singh is a sensitive social observer who exposes prostitution and depicts the helpless condition of the women trapped in it:

While I was petting and necking  
lying over her body she was  
calculating whether she could  
afford a new saree from what I  
would pay her  
tonight (Singh, Poem No 14)



The woman in the poem is more anxious for money and considers sex as a mere means to earn her livelihood. She indulges in it beyond any personal, social, or moral consideration entirely for material reasons. Sexual perversion has a wider scope and it is most blatant among youth of today who exploit every opportunity to indulge in sex. The picture in the following poem serves as an example of this idea:

Spring's full youth  
He unbuttons  
Her printed skirt  
On red cushion...(Singh, Poem No 15)

In another poem, the poet highlights the hidden aspects of promiscuous acts; that is, the spread of sexual disease posing threat to life. A call girl, for example, not only becomes an object of sexual pleasure and subject to violent sexual assaults, but also suffers deadly threats of sexually contagious diseases:

Squatted in sun she was cleaning  
white and yellow germs festering  
her womb still she thanked she  
was alive (Singh, Poem No 16)

The 'erotic' in Singh's poetry is not only limited to the contexts of sex and sexuality, but in varied multiple contexts. The objective of such uses is not so much to arouse a person erotically but to express the ideas strikingly and reflect various attitudes such as that of irony, satire, and anger. An instance is the speaker's recounting of his past failure and misfortune that is evoked by means of sex expression; the situation does not require the usage of the words suggesting anger and frustration:

... he thinks the machine is overworked  
in yawning hours, he eats goats'  
testicles and omelettes to green his  
nocturnal craze invaginates the blues of  
a road, its vugs and turns ( Singh, 122)

Here, the sex image "testicles" and action verb "invaginates" show the speaker's anger at his despicable condition, disillusionment with life, and his helplessness; and successfully convey his embittered mood. In another poem, one finds Singh exposing the corrupt pandits of Banaras using 'sex' imagery. The expression "mating" in the lines, for an instance, shows both the anger as well irony:

Banaras seems holier at night mating  
dogs and bitches join pundits in the  
name of religion... (Singh, 148)



A major section of Singh's poetry depicts his capability of diving deep into his inner-self and coming out with profound philosophical insights such as: Looking like reality this life is nothing but show don't fall in its traps ( Singh, Poem No 21)

Singh's poems display his philosophy ranging from the day to day common experience to that of the higher intellectual levels, such as:

So much is lost between  
the day break and rise of  
the evening star and not a  
soul screams in this zoo  
man

is worse in wild nakedness (Singh, Poem No 42) Here, reader finds Singh deeply contemplating over the passing days without making an impact over his life and is stunned to see this world remaining the same. Singh seems to be worried that even his life would just pass away in the same manner as everybody's, thus; he would be reduced to another character cheated by the subtle thief 'time'. He seems to be unable to make out, the purpose or the main objective behind his existence:

I don't fear death nor do I  
worry about life-after-death  
but I fear I know what life has  
been and could be without  
fortuity of birth and  
continuance of our failure to  
undo what we do ourselves. (Singh, Poem No 02)

In the above quoted lines, a person finds the poet's realization of the 'futile' attempts that a human makes to decipher the meaning of 'life' or 'human existence' altogether. The poet conveys a mixture of fear, despair and emptiness present in our every day's encounter with life. He presents the anxiety in its search for identity and meaning. The same idea is projected on a larger canvas when Singh exclaims:

There is no rest  
Even after death  
Body is cut open  
To detect  
The cause of death  
Then burnt to ashes  
To crown formality (Singh, Poem No 60)



Singh zooms into the predicament of a common man with his archetypal sceptre and exclaims with authority:

I am no Jesus but I can feel the pains of  
crucifixion as a common man suffer all  
what he suffered- play the same refrains  
(Singh, Poem No 60)

Person cannot miss the poet's existential concern in the lines quoted above. It clearly depicts the chaos which shrouds a human life. He is sensitive and bewildered to bear the burden of living with absurd realities and appears to have imperfection and unfulfilment hankering and helplessness, agony and anger, struggle and surrender. Yet despite all worries and concerns, Singh is hopeful:

If you see light  
After the day's end  
You can hope here  
Life is still left (Singh, Poem No 11)

Person cannot miss R. K. Singh's persistent search for meaning in a living characterized by myriads of existential worries such as monotonous work style, indifference, coercing, failures, corruption, hypocrisy, pollution, disease and death. The quest for the 'self' is therefore, a recurring impression that reader comes across in his collections. A person finds Singh competent in conveying grave serious thoughts and concepts with simple words: light, lamp, portion, cup, passion, confession, ages, anguish, tears, cries, faith, hope, and enemies as in:

the light of my lamp and portion  
of my cup couldn't lift my soul  
mired in passions the  
confessions couldn't remove  
my anguish of ages nor the tears  
and cries strengthen faith, hope  
and love-the rock slips the grip  
for enemies within...(Singh,  
Poem No 68)

Although a major section of Singh's poetry reflects grave philosophic concerns, and in the process, highlights the deteriorating social conditions, the optimism in them cannot be missed. He sounds like P. B. Shelley when he is at the peak of his optimism:

The withered leaves blown away in autumn come again  
with the tired rains the season confers through the soft  
grey clouds the growing freshness on naked trees (Singh,



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Poem No 53) The above quoted lines remind the reader of the unforgettable line from the poem 'Ode to the West Wind' where Shelley announces: "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?"

The versatility of Singh can never be challenged as being a poet of modern sensibility, he draws inspiration from diverse literatures of the world, from the English-speaking to the non-English; and strongly criticises those who are reluctant to change themselves despite the changes (paradigm shift) brought about by modern school of thoughts:

I celebrate difference and  
freedom of spirit but they  
question my birth  
call me a hypocrite (Singh, Poem No 56)

One finds Singh employing myths and superstitions in the best possible manner to dig out the social evils rampant in the society, and in the process, he comes closer to the common folks. One establishes a link with the poet and his string of thoughts in no time. He uses myths in a subtle manner at two levels: first in the use of mythical allusion; and second, in the treatment of rituals. One cannot miss the use of mythical allusions as metaphor that appears to be a compelling aspect of his personal symbolism. However, the treatment of rituals is marked by critical attitude and seems crucial to the revelation of moral and religious ideals implied in his poetry. His poetry clearly manifests his resistance to the prevalent myths and rituals:

Stimulating mysticism they fill the  
hollows through jugglery conceal  
their fractured faith (Singh, Poem No  
111) In the name of mysticism some  
religious leaders entrap innocent  
devotees in their obscure discourse.  
This appears to the speaker as  
“jugglery” or trick constructed to  
hide one’s emptiness. The speaker is  
distrustful to all such practices and  
doesn’t believe in the ideals of  
mysticism. One finds an attitude of  
disrespect and disillusionment  
towards rituals throughout his poetic  
journey, as he finds them to be  
irrelevant in practical life.



Singh finds rituals as a veil to disguise moral disintegration. This idea is strongly conveyed in a poem where the Christian ritual of election of Pope is alluded to represent the degradation of the Christian values, “Smoke rises in the church / Christ burns gradually” (Singh, Poem No 115). As known the process of election of Pope is carried out in several phases and is marked by in transparency and complexity. The practice undermines the values of “purity” and “simplicity” championed by Christ in favour of elaborate rituals and therefore represented as “Christ burns gradually.” The line embodies a sly comment on the Roman Catholic ritual preceding the selection of Pope that is determined after a series of sacred balloting of a group of cardinals. To the outside world the signal goes through smoke; black if the decision is not yet made and white if it is otherwise. The procedure of selection continues to be a trend since medieval age. It is ironical that Pope, the supreme authority of Christianity himself is elected based on values decrying the basic Christian ethos. The rising of smoke seems to represent gradual burning of the “Christ” or values propounded by Him.

Singh ceases to acknowledge divinity in any form: “I don’t know the god / or goddess or the mantra” (Singh, Poem No 26). The poet’s belief that God is created by “mind” “after its own image” also emphasized that it is the thought that creates myth. The speaker highlights the significance of thought rather than images (idols), being (god) and events (rituals) in myths. (Singh, Poem No 38). The poet further provides an illustration of the inefficacy of religious beliefs, myths, and rituals in the lines:

I couldn’t make my bedroom church  
reading psalms and Lord’s prayer the light  
of my lamp and the portion of my cup  
couldn’t lift my soul mired in passions and  
silence of the morning the confessions  
couldn’t remove my anguish of ages...  
(Singh, Poem No 53)

The lines suggest the speaker’s inability to trust or find consolation in mythical belief. He repudiates “psalms and Lord’s prayer” as dead and ineffective for they could not enlighten him. Even confessions fail to relieve him from the burden on his heart. Personal and social anguish overpower his senses and thoughts, as a result, he fails to accept any of the ideals as assuring.

As a poet, one finds R. K. Singh addressing various social, political, as well as environmental issues in the later phase of his poetic journey. One may opine that there is a remarkable change in Singh’s taste and concern over time. He keeps a keen eye on the happenings in the surrounding and is hugely affected by their causes and consequences on individual and on the society. An illustration of his social awareness can be given by means of his effort to highlight the evil of corruption that pervades the entire social structure political, religious and any other. The poet presents the causes and consequences of the evil in his typical explosive mode. He projects utter degeneration of the political system of the nation as he foregrounds the abuse of public power,





office, and resources by political leaders, government officials and employees, including academicians.

In the poem ‘Share Scam’, the speaker seems to be deeply grieved to perceive the current political scenario marked by scams and scandals, as he refers to share scam engineered by Harshad Mehta, a Mumbai based share broker, who took advantage of the loopholes of Indian banking system and carried on many inter banking transaction that brought about rise in BSE Sensex in the year 1992. Harshad Mehta had emptied out hard earned money of the Indian citizens from the banks. In the poem the speaker seems to be deeply grieved by the incident and seems anxiously waiting for the restoration of the resources:

We must wait till  
the share scam is  
smoked out and  
resources restored.  
(Singh, 17)

Singh, being an academician himself, is well aware of the prevalent corruption in the academia. The poet highlights discrimination practiced inside institutions of learning where seniors avail privileges while demands of subordinates are ruled out even if justified:

with privileges in the name of rules  
order not to leave station without  
prior permission (Singh, 15) The  
speaker in the poem feels oppressed  
as if put in a “virtual house arrest”.  
Such an issue of oppression and  
coercion is a pertinent aspect of the  
growing work culture in Indian  
cities. As a teacher and professor,  
the poet also indicates the culture of  
neglect and partiality that thrives  
within an academic institute. This  
neglect to a department or field of  
study gives rise to dissatisfaction  
and diffidence, which in turn leads  
to lack of creativity, and academics  
turn

“barren”. The speaker finds the consequences of the “academic frauds”:



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academic frauds breed culture with  
erect greed meanness sweeps bigness  
with granite (Singh, 47)

Thus, one finds Singh's style to be quite straightforward. He promotes a view of assimilation and harmony as the true artistic spirit. One finds most of his poems celebrating what remains uncelebrated or unceremonious. He brings to the fore every puny and petty thing that occurs in day to day life. To quote Dr R. A. Singh:

R. K. Singh's poetry seems to be rooted in visions and divisions that traverse human existence, feeling the pulse in the rhythmic flow of time. His social vision intersects with the private; his flux of emotions creates a complex of sound and silence, waving through love, loveliness, failure, frustration, and memories in search of home in a hostile world. His imaginings are not only delightful of the senses but also challenging to the mind. (Singh, 201)

His work includes reflection on the modern features of life such as monotonous existence, failure, guilt, humiliation, loneliness, rejection, helplessness, and consequent worries.

His poetry is all inclusive like life; it harmonises positive and negative, sweet and bitter, beautiful and ugly, or high and low. In R. K. Singh, one finds a successful manifestation of an individual poetic ideology, and a distinct style that is bold and assimilative. The frank use of sexual expressions, use of indigenous terms, words from the field of science and technology combined with bleak Nature imagery occur in various combinations in his poems, and they make him stand apart from the rest of his contemporary poets.

One finds R. K. Singh strongly attached to his surroundings and cannot miss the deep personal connect that he establishes with all his senses, i.e., ability to see (very minute observer), hear (responds to every call), touch (very sensitive), smell (can predict any unusual development), and taste (has a hands-on experience of every social, political, or economic phenomena) described or discussed in his poems. Thus, it may be claimed that for R. K. Singh, poetry is neither the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotions nor the emotions recollected in tranquillity; but a momentary experience that tickles his senses unexpectedly, and bids adieu.

The fact cannot be ignored that R. K. Singh uses his poetry as a vehicle to communicate his everyday experiences to the world, and in the process, shares his 'understanding' of the world. His poems help him release the anguish, anxiety, and the burden that he accumulates through his interactions and observations around. Thus, his poetry becomes a medium of his liberation. One finds him celebrating his senses to understand this world better; communicating all his experiences, in the form of poems, to the world without being influenced; and in the process, developing a resilience or acceptance, to everything that this world offers. His poetry helps him release all the pressure built within, thus, reach a stage of 'utmost' calm. Hence, it may be aptly stated that: R. K. Singh celebrates his 'senses' to attain 'Nirvana.'



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