

## **Socio-cultural Perspective of the Novel 'Zindaginama' by Krishna Sobti**

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### **Abstract**

*The present paper seeks to delve into the historical narrative of the composite Punjab from 1906 to 1927 CE and its distinctive cultural ethos, exploring its evolution portrayed in Krishna Sobti's acclaimed novel, 'Zindaginama'. Krishna Sobti, a revered luminary in Indian literature, bestowed with the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1980 CE, bore witness to the kaleidoscopic transformations of Punjab's cultural landscape, vividly etched in her narrative as a testament to the profound societal shifts of her epoch. 'Zindaginama' intricately interlaces the historical and cultural nuances of pre-partition India's composite Punjab into a literary tapestry, thus preserving the cherished legacy of the region. It serves as a poignant depiction of the disruptive forces and clandestine influences that precipitated Punjab's partition, encapsulating both the cultural cohesion and the ensuing disintegration that characterized the Indian milieu.*

*Through meticulous analysis, this discourse endeavours to unravel the intricate fabric of this absorbing narrative, accentuating its significance as a historical testimony. It elucidates the cultural unity and the gradual unravelling of societal fabric as depicted through Krishna Sobti's literary craftsmanship, offering a compelling insight into the multifaceted dynamics that moulded Punjab's destiny.*

Krishna Sobti, a distinguished figure in Indian fiction, was honoured with the prestigious 'Gyanpeeth Award' in 2017 for her remarkable literary contributions. Her novel 'Zindaginama' earned her the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1980. Despite commencing her literary journey in Hindi, Sobti's writings resonated deeply with the Punjabi community, encapsulating their unique identity within her fictional narratives. Her portrayal of the distinctive Punjabi way of life stems from her personal encounters and deep-rooted experiences within the Punjab region, solidifying her reputation not only as a prominent Hindi writer but also as a celebrated chronicler of Punjabi existence through her literary works.

As narrated by translator Neer Kanwal Mani, Zindaginama is Krishna Sobti's magnum opus, a giant patchwork tapestry in rich warm colours and vivid detail, that depicts the life and times of a small village in pre-partition Punjab -a Punjab that once spread across the five divisions of Rawalpindi, Multan, Lahore, Jalandhar and Ambala. That world, that way of life, no longer exists, neither in India nor in Pakistan.

The words said by Krishna Sobti as quoted above are the sincere expression of her deep love she had nurtured for Panjab about whom she had been carrying in her pleasant memories of

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the time spent in the land of Panjab, the Panjab where Sikh Gurus and many other saints had been composing their verses, the Panjab where the people from all the sections of the society were deeply devoted to the Gurus, the Panjab where the Hindus, the Mohammedans and the Sikhs were closely tied to one another through a common culture. This was the Panjab which remains shined in Krishna Sobti's inner self, that fascinated her continuously and filled her with nostalgia whenever she happened to get remind of it. The point under focus is that primary sources of inspiration for whole of Krishna Sobti's literary work are closely connected with the totality of Panjab's life. The description contained in the novel *Zindaginama* highlights her deep concern how present Panjab has gone astray and how all those traditional values and beliefs which were its rich treasure in the past are getting eroded with the passage of time.

Although Krishna Sobti has published all of her works in Devnagari script yet the language is the Panjabi which was spoken in the area of Panjab where she had spent her early life. By adopting Devnagari script for her writings she had integrated Panjab, Panjabi living and Panjabi way of thinking into whole of India. Making use of Devnagari script, Krishna Sobti has introduced the Panjabi culture in real terms to a large number of people who were not acquainted with its living. It is through her artistic calibre of depicting the pious, humanitarian and heroic living-style of Panjab through her writings that she has emerged as the representative fiction writer of Panjab. *Zindaginama* is a powerful expression of recollections from the past, in which she has portrayed the values and cultural beliefs through a deep sense of pride. This book brilliantly captures the story of India through a village where people of many faiths coexisted peacefully, living off the land.

The time-span covered by the novel *Zindaginama* is 1906 CE to 1927 CE. During this period India was under British rule, the British were on very sound footing in whole of India. This novel also refers to the world wars which provided the life to Indians with new direction and inspiration. The first part of the novel extends over the presentation of Panjabi living and the second one is weaved out of those happenings which related to the sons of Panjab who would proceed abroad to fight wars as part of the British army. When the Panjabi soldiers returned home after fighting in the distant lands, they would narrate their experiences to the people around and this was instrumental in promoting new awareness among the Panjabis.

The important aspect of the structure of the novel *Zindaginama* is that it is not an ordinary narration of an interesting story built upon a well thought of plot nor does it have main or central character around whom the narration would revolve. The primary axis of the description

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given through this novel is 'Sath' a common meeting point located in the interior of a village where men with different tastes especially the elders would often gather for idle talk and informal chit-chat. There, they would sit for hours exchanging different anecdotes. The subject could be an incident having taken place during the day or an historical event or a personage. The novel comprises a series of such anecdotes but each one of these is executed in isolation, each description building up and reaching its conclusion independently. The novelist repeatedly presents those currents of cultural affinity permeating the Panjabi living which bind the Hindus, the Sikhs and the Muslims emotionally imparting a spirit of co-existence to them. It is the British who try to tarnish the fabric of this closely bound cultural co-existence by creating mutual differences through designation of every community as a separate nation.

Krishna Sobti extends the saga of degeneration from the cultural affinity to cultural cleavage over a long period of time. This forms the central theme of this novel. Every narrative, revolving around this theme, is engaged in its development reflecting the multi-coloured forms of the inner-self of the composite Panjab thus giving spontaneous expression to the cultural variety and richness of Panjab, flourishing crops of the land, heroism of Panjab, mutual love and affection based on firm affiliations, aspirations of the people, celebrations, festivals, rituals and customs and public morality. The special feature of the description presented in the novel is that the composite brotherhood emerging is free from any sense of discrimination, communal tensions and segregation on the basis of religion. The novel includes in it various instances of mutual trust and affinity prevalent among different sections of the society. For example, Shahni, the wife of the Shah of the village, even though a Hindu, recites Sikh scripture 'Japuji Sahib' early in the morning every day, all girls and daughters-in-law are given fatherly treatment by the men of the village, food served by those from so-called low castes is accepted without hesitation and performing worship at the seat of Muslim Pir revered as 'Aulia' (Muslim religious personage) by all the communities of the village for obtaining favours such as birth of a son are bold indications of the cultural relationships and human brotherhood prevalent among the inhabitants of Panjab.

It is significant to consider the prevailing historical conditions of Panjab before venturing into the deliberations over the other cultural dimensions of the Panjab emerging out of the novel *Zindaginama*. This is because we can apprehend the two main currents of the theme of this novel viz. the cultural unity and cultural disintegration properly. If we understand the historical conditions and facts related to the cultural identity of Panjab as it is only through such an

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historical awareness that we can get acquainted with the gravity of the theme of the novel. Panjab has been the border province on the western side of India. Being the border province it was the first to be attacked by all the forces invading India from the western side. In fact the invaders used the land of Panjab as a gateway to enter India. The historical and cultural conditions of a border province of Panjab has remained different from those of the provinces located in the interior because of this reason also that some of the invaders, in spite of being foreigners, had preferred to settle here among the original inhabitants. The cultural traditions of all those communities who settled on the land of Panjab after the invasions, got assimilated into the culture of the Panjabis. As a result, the culture of Panjab has emerged as a mixed culture involving varied cultural currents. This mixed form of culture has given shape to a definite form of cultural synthesis. In order to understand the fundamental sources of the culture of Panjab we have to, on the one hand explore the roots of Indian culture and, on the other, to identify the impact of Islamic culture on Indian life in general and on Panjabi life in particular. Both of these sources have joined hands to produce the composite culture of Panjab where all the Panjabis revere Sikh Gurus with equal devotion and are influenced equally by the inspiring utterances of the Sufi saints as well, and where a Hindu, a Sikh or a Mohammedan is recognized not by his or her sect but on the basis of his or her being a Panjabi. It is the composite form of this culture which had given birth to the close mutual relationships which kept on nurturing the social life of Panjab over a long period. This cultural affinity got cracked when the British rulers, through intrigue, divided the people of Panjab by promoting communal sentiments of different sects. The novel *Zindaginama* pinpoints very boldly the cultural transformation taking place at this historical juncture in Panjab. We get varied types of evidence out of the text of the novel which indicate that Panjabi community life was not dominated by any single sect but it was an amalgamation of various communities.

Krishna Sobti's novel *Zindaginama* though presents the varied plurality and multiplicity of culture of Punjabis yet it focuses on the fact that there is underlying unity behind this cultural variety. This unity assumes its shape not in the collective living of varied communities together on the same land but in the integration of one community with the others and ample evidence of it is available in the text of the novel as, for example, the Hindu, Sikh and Muslim families join a social function at the same time with the same zeal as if they were related to one another through firm emotional bonds. A special feature of the culture of Panjab is that mutual affinity at the cultural level remains undisturbed even when people here are involved in a sharp conflict

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with the rulers of the land. A major instance of this communal harmony is the compilation of the Guru Granth Sahib, the scripture of the Sikh faith, wherein varied compositions have been put together as a symbol of cultural unity. Krishna Sobti has woven together those episodes from the social life which give powerful expression to the emotional affinity, deep love and mutual attachment prevalent among the people of different religious and caste groups. These people have deep reverence and sincere consideration for every being around.

Such indications give expression to the conduct of the people of Panjab who do not at all suffer from communal bias. This is also conveyed through the scenes of *Trinjan* i.e. spinning bouts in groups by the ladies where young and old women participate with pompous spirit and splendour. Such spirit and splendour is not occasional but are part of normal routine at the Shah household. Such households have been the symbols of cultural integration in Panjab villages and Krishna Sobti brings them at the centre of the description to elaborate their contribution towards maintaining an atmosphere of harmony and trust in the society.

The second part of the novel *Zindaginama* deals with the onset of cultural disturbance taking place subsequent to the era of cultural affinity as depicted in the first part. The novelist takes up the historical changes taking place gradually, changes that which create restlessness in the minds of people of composite Panjab and attempt to vitiate the environment of love, peace and harmony already prevalent here. Such an environment had emerged as a challenge to the British rulers and they countered it through an intriguing strategy. Different communities were pushed towards communal polarization and a feeling of hatred and separatism was instilled among them. The role of intrigue and ill-will played by the British rulers ultimately succeeded in disturbing the relationship of love, harmony and peace which had been prevalent for so long among different sections of the society.

One of the prominent illustrations of this unsavoury situation as found in the text of the novel is concerning the glaring episode of depicting Sikh community as traitors by labelling Ghadri Babas as anti-India. When the topic related to Ghadri Babas is taken up in the Sath, the Muslim side which had been eulogizing the Sikhs for their valour for centuries starts criticising them though in muffled voices. This criticism forebodes the cultural divide in the society. Din Mohammed, one of the characters of the novel, comes in the support of the British rulers instead of accepting Ghadri Babas as heroic personages. The arguments which take place between Ganda Singh and Din Mohammed while sitting at the Sath proves that mutual relations stand

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disturbed now. The British rulers had tried to create the cleavage in the social fabric through a deep conspiracy and the conspiracy has proved successful. Though the text of the novel does not include references to the events leading to the partition of India yet the latter part of the novel furnishes indications of the environment of communal tensions which had built up prior to the actual partition. Though the argumentation which takes place at the Sath does not lead to an explosive situation but, definitely, tensions seem to be growing gradually. While, earlier, praise was showered upon the heroes of the other side at the Sath now the tendency of eulogizing the heroes of one's own side appears to have grown significantly. Such developments as presented in the novel indicate the divide which has emerged in the hitherto warm relationships. It is Krishna Sobti's artistic acumen that cultural divide she has presented in her novel carries forebodings of the extremely tragic events which are going to take place in near future. Historical explorations related to India especially Panjab region also provide us with indications that the tension in Panjab had not erupted from the inside but it had been ushered in through intriguing policies adopted by the outsiders. Although the narrative of novel *Zindaginama* is limited to the events and situations related to the period from 1906 CE to 1927 CE yet the truth emerging out of the description included in it came into fore in 1947 CE.

It can be concluded on the basis of the social, historical and cultural study of the novel *Zindaginama* that this work by Krishna Sobti is a meritorious achievement of hers. She has re-established an exclusive fiction style through it which is quite innovative. Extending her narrative over the period 1906 CE to 1927 CE, she has presented the social and cultural life of composite Panjab marking distinctly the two dimensions it has assumed and which emerged successively. The first dimension presents varied scenes of Panjabi living discernible on its land in order to highlight the close relationships prevailing among the people of Panjab without giving any consideration to the communal identity of others as the Hindus, the Sikhs or the Mohammedans. Tied firmly to one another through the feelings of love and brotherhood they stand by the others sincerely through thick and thin. Using the device of 'Sath' the author depicts the interaction among the people in gatherings at one venue where they get engrossed in informal conversation and exchange their views and this interaction brings forth the cordiality and warmth of relationships in spite of the obvious distinction of the communities they belong to. The second dimension of the life presented in the novel marks the sense of hatred which appears to be replacing the spirit of amity and comradeship which had been prevalent since so long and this leads to erosion of harmony in social relationships. The

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intriguing policy adopted by the British rulers injects the poison of communal hatred into the healthy social set up. The people living like good neighbours on the same land turn sworn enemies of one another and they become instrumental in paving the way for the tragic events which beleaguered the country in 1947 CE.

*Zindaginama* is an impressive manifestation of Krishna Sobti's creative calibre of extraordinary literary art through which she presented the various shades of the life of the inhabitants of Panjab, the details which enshrine the historical truth in true sense though these might miss the attention of the historians. Literary masterpieces like *Zindaginama* do not include historical facts but such eminent literary creations give bold expressions to the lessons of history. As Krishna Sobti herself observed that history is not that which is constructed on the basis of references and evidence generated by the rulers and is put into record; history is that which is drawn out of the life-style and total living of the people. The culture of the masses is the real historical window which may not be able to exhibit facts but projects the truth completely.

Keeping such a consideration into view, we can safely conclude that the social and cultural study has been presented in its entirety through the novel *Zindaginama* which has given multi-layered expression to Panjab and Panjabi culture and this realistic articulation can be deemed a literary document of authentic representation of the cultural values of the joint Panjab.

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