

**BALLIOL TIE AND BEETLE: A POST-COLONIAL READING OF  
KHUSHWANT SINGH’S “KARMA”**

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*“If I eat an apple, I like to eat it with my senses”* – D. H. Lawrence

Khushwant Singh’s *Karma* is a complex story, though a short one. It works on many levels and identifying the main issue in it, is not an easy task, as there are several important issues reflected here. First reading of the story *Karma* by Khuswant Singh gives the idea of a story of pride that goes before a fall. In the story Mohan Lal's sin of pride is punished when two British soldiers throw him out of a first-class compartment. He invites the unexpected turn in his life by his thoughts and actions while his wife's good karma rewards her. She can have a safe and comfortable journey in a ladies' compartment. Mohan Lal is no mere victim of his karma; he is also its agent. The story also serves as a symbol of resistance against its colonizer. It elaborates the brutish and uncivilized behaviour of the British soldiers, who represent the colonizers in contrast to the polite and gentle manners of Mohan. The story aptly elaborates the nationalistic culture and gender roles while portraying colonialism. The author, further beautifully presents the cultural conflict between British Empire and India with the portrayal of Mohan Lal (The pseudo- English man) and Lachmi(The unheroic Indian). Singh ridicules the slavish imitation of English manners, which has led to snobbery in a class of people in our country through the character of Mohanlal. He is culturally enslaved by the British way of life; travels in first class; looks forward to converse with the English in the Oxford accent, whereas his uneducated wife Lachmi, who lives world apart, travels by interclass. This paper attempts to analyze Khushwant Singh’s “Karma” in the perspective of the Existential Philosophy.

Existentialism is an area of philosophy concerned with the meaning of human existence. Its concern is on the issue of what it means to be a human being. Stanford Encyclopedica of Philosophy reveals that the term was explicitly adopted as a self-description by Jean-Paul Sartre. Existentialism became identified with a cultural movement through literary and philosophical output of Sartre and his associates—notably Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Albert Camus in the 1940s and 1950s. Sartre's existentialism is inspired by the work of the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger's 1927 *Being and Time*. Sartre's slogan—“existence

precedes essence”—serves as the introduction of what is most distinctive of existentialism. John Macquarrie writes that "all the leading existentialists . . . are [primarily] concerned with the individual whose quest for authentic selfhood focuses on the meaning of personal being" despite paying "lip-service to the truth that man exists as a person only in a community of persons." [John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1973), p. 17.] Sartre and his "existential psychoanalysis" (as set out in *Being and Nothingness*) deal with the influence of existentialism on psychology. The late Heinz Kohut developed a "self psychology" on the basis of existentialism. Arnold Goldberg says, "Through self psychology . . . we have learned to approach relations not merely as what goes on between people, but in terms of the significance and meanings that become attached to the 'goings on.'" (quoted in *Existentialism Here and Now - Alfie Kohn* [www.alfiekohn.org/miscellaneous/existentialism.htm](http://www.alfiekohn.org/miscellaneous/existentialism.htm)) It looks at issues such as love, death and the meaning of life - and how one deal with the sense of value and meanings in one's own life. People are free to choose among alternatives available to them in living and have a large role in shaping their own personal destinies. Thus individual's free will, freedom of choice, and personal responsibility are important factors in Existentialism. The manner in which we live and what we become are results of our choices and people must take responsibility for directing their own lives. Existentialism further suggests that man is full of anxiety and despair with no meaning in his life, just simply existing. The decisive choice made by him about his own future brings dignity and meaning as a human being. According to existential psychologists individuals in social dimension relate to others as they interact with the public world around them. Some accept, and live with the culturally constructed norms. Some other rejects and is isolated. They strive for higher position in social hierarchy with the adoption of the trend, the fashion of the moment. Thus adoption of a social or political cause comes to be one way of giving purpose to a life.

A look at the character of Mohan Lal through the Existential philosophy brings a different shade. His so frequently discussed snobbery turns as his necessity and freedom. Colonialism in India had created the conviction that the British are the epitome of modernity; English style and diction are the synonyms of power and upper strata in social hierarchy. A distinct human characteristic is the struggle for a sense of significance and purpose in life. Mohan has his own choice to embrace the British life style to lead a life of dignity as supposed by him. In his efforts to elevate his position in the periphery of British culture to the centre he opted for expensive studies at Oxford. This enhances the sense of significance and purpose in his life. He feels proud, confident and in an elevated position as he says looking at the mirror,

Distinguished, efficient - even handsome. That neatly-trimmed moustache  
– the suit from Saville Row with the carnation in the buttonhole - the  
aroma of eau de cologne, talcum powder and Scented soap all about you !  
Yes, old fellow, you are a bit of all right.

The Saville Row suit with the carnation in the buttonhole makes him different from the uneducated, uncivilized fellow Indians. The symbols that Sir Mohan adopts are those of power, privilege and respect; something which he desperately wants but cannot have because he is an Indian. Therefore he rejects all he can of his native Indian culture and replaces them with the English culture and all of its trappings. The education at Oxford, the knowledge he accumulates there reflects Said's views on the relationship of knowledge and power. Knowledge, for him becomes power, not the instrument to serve people. As a modern, progressive and masculine person he presumes to have absolute superiority over the traditional and the savage and certainly

over women like Lachmi. He demonstrates Ballhatchet's prescription of the ideal of masculinity appropriate for the upper class; the affirmation of the masculinity through sexual distance, abstinence and self-control. The patriarchal masculinity endows him with a deeply masochistic self-denial that turns him away from the wholeness of life.

The colonial power of 200 years is too strong to be effectively resisted. The acceptance of a coloniser as an inescapable reality of life produces colonial mentality. Colonialism has colonized his mind and body and his cultural priorities have changed. Like many Indians, he strives to imitate the powerful English people as they are passes to upward position in social hierarchy. He suffers from an internal inferiority complex which produces "cultural cringe". So, he dismisses his own culture as inferior to the British culture. The stick of western manner, outfit, the carrots of the allure of adventure, the possibility of masculine camaraderie and opportunity to prove one's worth brings his 'cultural uproot'. He becomes culturally alienated as he devalues his own culture. He associates power and success with suit of Seville Row, Times, Eau de cologne, talcum powder, scented soap, Belliol tie. Hence he comments to the mirror, "You are so very much like everything else in this country, inefficient, dirty ..." His choices to lead the life of his own definition makes him one of the 'Macaulay's Children'. This reminds one of J.N Farquhar's comments:

The new educational policy of the Government created during these years the modern educated class of India. These are men who think and speak in English habitually, who are proud of their citizenship in the British Empire, who are devoted to English literature, and whose intellectual life has been almost entirely formed by the thought of the West ....

([www.periwork.com/peri\\_db/civi\\_db/2003...22\\_15.../index2.html](http://www.periwork.com/peri_db/civi_db/2003...22_15.../index2.html))

His existential choice gives birth to elements of mental insecurity, alienation and conflict which are predominant traits of existentialism. He alienates himself from his dirty, vulgar countrymen to maintain his upper class status. Ultimately he is alienated by the people for whom he keeps himself in alienation. The British soldiers shove him away from the first class compartment. There is always a conflict between the refined Mohan and the indigenous background. It is apparent that he hangs on Balliol tie, *The Times*, the scotch, the English cigarettes. He poses to be a modern and autonomous individual in contrast to his very own communal identity. His modernity transfers him to a permanent cultural liminal position. This liminal position puts him "betwixt and between" two cultures. One important feature of liminal positions is that they eliminate the stable boundary lines and adopt imitative processes with a focus on to copy. Further, liminal moments are times of tension, extreme reactions. Hence, Mohan adopts the mimetic behaviour. Culturally alienated societies often exhibit a weak sense of cultural self-identity and place little worth on themselves. Culturally alienated Mohan has an appetite for all things that is English. He is so much anxious "to commune with his dear old England" that he thinks of welcoming the English soldiers to the first class coupe, in spite of their low class. He speaks like "an Englishman's - only the very necessary words and properly anglicised." Also "He wanted everything 'tickety-boo'." He is excited at the prospect of conversation with English people. Mohan reminds us of the views of Suzanne Kobasa (the author of *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*) on the relationship of stress and disease, i.e., "Behind the questions of stress resistance, I see a basic existential conception of life -- such issues as the inevitability of change and struggle [and the idea] that what one is is what one

makes." (*Existentialism Here and Now - Alfie Kohn* [www.alfiekohn.org/miscellaneous/existentialism.htm](http://www.alfiekohn.org/miscellaneous/existentialism.htm))

The pressure to 'catch-up' is so high that he creates self-imposed captivity around himself and holds high the culture of the British. He is panicked by the possible disgrace, which the stamp of 'uncivilized Indian' brings with it. The constant fear of falling from higher position in social hierarchy creates existential angst in him. The term *Angst* introduced by existentialist Søren Kierkegaard is associated with the conflict between actual responsibilities to self, one's principles, and others. The feeling arises from the experience of human freedom and responsibility. Mohan is hyperactive to prove his authenticity. As he has made his choice he adopts the means possible to let his actual values come into play. He relegates his fellowmen to a status of a lower and inferior "other". He makes use of the "five years of a crowded glorious life" as the means for improvement and importance. He is now an English man in mind but with Indian skin.

Camus considers that "it is the beauty which people encounter in life that makes it worth living. People may create meaning in their own lives, which may not be the objective meaning of life (if there is one), but can still provide something for which to strive." (Albert Camus and the Philosophy of the Absurd.doc - jneff [jneff.wikispaces.com/](http://jneff.wikispaces.com/)) Mohan perceives beauty in Oxford education and English mannerisms which bring meanings in his life. So he feels "free", and righteous and superior about his actions. He is able socially and morally to enjoy lonely comfort in the midst of "his dirty, vulgar countrymen". He comfortably resorts to hypocrisy and exhibitionism with no hiccup.

The existentialists count the basic aspects of the human condition "as the capacity for self-awareness, the tension between freedom and responsibility, the creation of an identity and the establishment of meaningful relationships." (Existential Theory idcontent. [bellevue.edu/content](http://bellevue.edu/content)) The incompatible couple, Mohan and his wife (Lachmi) create their own identities on the basis of their self-awareness. Their characters are an absurd juxtaposition of the adoption and originality. Lachmi is an ordinary middle class Indian woman representing indigenous lifestyle. She usually talks her native language, Hindustani. She wears a dirty saree and sits on her suitcase outside the first class waiting room, where Mohan waits. She takes cramped chapatties and some mango pickle in content, chews betel nuts and talks to the coolie. She usually travels in the zenana compartment, instead of the first class coupe in which Mohan travels in train.

She spits her betel saliva out of the train. Lachmi encounters beauty in her life. The image of Lachmi displays a happy, blissful and content woman with no complaints. Her sang-froid is in-built, not incurred like Mohan. Hence she can emit a "long, loud belch" in ease with no care for mannerisms. She represents India's liberal traditions and deeply held convictions about personal liberty. She lives her life passionately and sincerely without caring for other's appreciation. She is true to her own personality, her spirit. It is her existential spirit. She does not prefer to be a model of the gullible, hopeless victim of colonialism. She fights her own battle for survival in her own way by default.

Existentialists also adopt humanistic psychological approach to personality to study and evaluate personality. This approach focuses on healthy, motivated people who attain self-actualization. The concept “self-actualization” is discussed in Maslow’s hierarchy theory in his article, *A Theory of Human Motivation*. Self-actualization, he says, is “the desire for self-fulfilment, namely the tendency for him [the individual] to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.” (*Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs - Simply Psychology* [www.simplypsychology.org](http://www.simplypsychology.org)) Maslow used the term ‘self-actualization’ to describe a desire, a motivation to realize one's capabilities. Self-actualization involves the motivation for psychological growth, thereby developing and fulfilling one’s potentialities in contrary to the involvement with one’s deficiency. In accordance to Maslow, self-actualizers accept themselves and their circumstances. They also accept others for what they are. Instead of solving personal problems they strive to find solutions to cultural problems. They have strong senses of privacy, autonomy, human values and appreciation of life.

Lachmi fits into the profile of Self-Actualizers prescribed by Maslow like “Efficient perceptions of reality”, “Comfortable acceptance of self, others, nature”, “Spontaneity”, “Autonomy”, “Continued freshness of appreciation”, “Fellowship with humanity”, “Comfort with solitude”. (*Self-Actualisation/ Corporate Meditation* [www.corporatemeditation.com](http://www.corporatemeditation.com)) She can judge people and situations correctly and efficiently. Her confrontation with absurdity of life projects her faith, confidence and self-actualization. The disagreeable condition does not throttle her warmth and understanding. She is sensitive to the fake. She wears gold bangles, diamond nose ring, but a dirty sari. Her attempt is not to be the pseudo-British but rather to be a woman of Indian ideology. She accepts Mohan’s nature with love and tolerance. She does not fume, frown or is not seething at the behaviour of Mohan towards her. Her conversation with the railway coolie very well displays her acceptance with conviction of Mohan’s treatment to her. The conversation follows:

Coolie- 'Are you travelling alone, sister?' Lachmi- 'No, I am with my master, brother. He is in the waiting room. He travels first class. He is a vizier and a barrister, and meets so many officers and Englishmen in the trains - and I am only a native woman. I can't understand English and don't know their ways, so I keep to my zenana inter-class.'

The dialogue shows her unusual and spontaneous bias and wry sense of humour. Like self-actualizers she has uninterrupted appreciation of life’s basic goods. Nowhere one can find a tinge of sorrow in her character. She loves life and humanity. Her life is a texture of celebration and joy. Sorrow or remorse cannot touch it. She only can thank “the gods for the favour of a filling meal” of chapattis and mango pickle. Her fellowship with humanity is felt from her conversation with the coolie. She “chats away merrily” with him. Further she readily gives space to Mohan without any disagreement. Her deep loving bond enables her to accept and act according to his whims.

No relatives come to her house as Mohan dislikes them. Further, Mohan has no time for her except the nocturnal visits of a few minutes. Loneliness does not gnaw at her. She is comfortable being alone. Isolation cannot grapple her due to her existential concept of struggle against the odds of life. She relates to herself and in this way creates a personal world. She waits not for the support of others. Mohan dismisses her as an illiterate native woman. Yet she takes charge and manages efficiently the affairs including “Sir Mohan Lal's luggage”. Mohan is busy with his “Ek Chhota”, with only one anxious thought to establish his English roots.



It can be said that she corroborates to the image of self-actualizers who feel safe, accepted, loved, loving, and alive, not anxious. Her self-actualization leads to resistance of colonial acts of authority and oppression in a different hue. In comparison to Mohan's weak sense of cultural self-identity she creates her own identity with self-awareness, critique, and celebration of culturally constructed norms. She is not the woman with bowed head and lowered eyes. In a dirty sari, with the trunk, brass Tiffin carrier and beetle box she never wishes to switch over to English culture. The overwhelming presence of the English around her cannot deter her. True self-expression lies at the heart of a successful personality. Lachmi is successful and her illiteracy cannot hold her back. People are free to choose among alternatives available to them in living and have a large role in shaping their own personal destinies. Both Mohan and Lachmi are exposed directly or indirectly to the colonial situation. Both struggle in different ways, with ideas of authority, responsibility, psychological security, self-esteem, hierarchy and power. Both of them choose two different alternatives to act under colonialism. Both of them are caught in the web of conflicts of interest over the construction of culture. The Conflict Theory of Culture states that one of the psychological tools to understand cultural conflict and its role in the control of behaviour in human being is 'explicit processing.' (Evolution, Psychology, and a Conflict Theory of Culture [www.epjournal.net/pdf](http://www.epjournal.net/pdf)) By explicit processing mechanisms human beings either construct culture according to the culturally constructed norms or with explicit awareness of possible costs and benefits. This leads to behaviour that attempts to influence culture. Mohan assesses the possible benefits of the adaptation of Western culture and acts accordingly. Kevin MacDonald in the article "Evolution, Psychology, and a Conflict Theory of Culture" states that Means-end reasoning and visualizing goals are critical to the production of cultural artefacts in the real world. The Bischof-Köhler hypothesis states that only human being engages in mental time travel into future to attain goals. He works on a mental plan of action. It requires "executive function abilities like 'response inhibition' (i.e., suppressing the urge), 'response preparation' (imagining a viable technique to achieve the goal)". (Evolution, Psychology, and a Conflict Theory of Culture [www.epjournal.net/pdf](http://www.epjournal.net/pdf)) As stated above, Mohan suppresses every human's desire to lead a life of love, affection and mutual respect. In addition, he is busy in 'response preparation' to achieve the probable outcome i.e. the appreciation of English officers. He makes the mental time travel as he imagines how *The Times*, Balliol tie, whiskey, English cigarettes will open up 'a vista leading to a fairy-land of Oxford colleges, masters, dons, tutors, boat-races and rigger matches.' On the other hand, social controls and ideology enforced by the nationalistic resolution for women is the psychological mechanism adopted by Lachmi for the transmission of culture. This initiates internal solidarity and cohesiveness in her. She makes all compromises but is not psychologically swayed. Her dirty white saree in contrast to the suit from Saville Row is a small example. She has a streak of new humanism in her existentialism. Alfie Kohn quotes in *Existentialism Here and Now* on Richard E. Johnson's argument that existential choice must exist. She protects her deepest faith with passivity. Exaggeration in display of sense of autonomy and self-respect is not found in her character. Further, Mohan's choice is deficiency-motivated whereas in case of Lachmi it is growth-oriented. The identity of an Indian haunts him. So, he projects his discarded other self on Lachmi. The choice ends in Mohan's feet glued to earth and Lachmi going ahead spitting red saliva. Lachmi heroically continues to exist. She makes a transition from being wife of Mohan, living within the confines and constraint imposed by him to be liberated to an unknown, wider world. In a twist victory becomes calamitous for the victor, not for the vanquished.

The contemplation on this untoward turn of incidents reminds one of Camus's famous words in a collection of essays entitled "Resistance, Rebellion and Death" : "Freedom is not made up principally of privileges; it is made up especially of duties. Our proudest duty is to defend personality to the very end, against the impulse toward coercion and death, the freedom of that culture--in other words, the freedom of work and of creation". Mohan's attitude towards his freedom and responsibility leads him to the unpleasant lot. He makes choices but is oblivious of the responsibility to uphold the deals he has made with other people. He enjoys power without any accountability. He keeps himself away from the common Indians. He does not execute his duties towards his wife and relatives and society. His urge makes him to have "nocturnal visits to the upper storey and all-too-brief sexual acts with obese old Lachmi, smelling of sweat and raw onions." Mohan's purely individualistic attitudes do not go with Satre's view i.e. "When we say that a man is responsible for himself, we do not only mean that he is responsible for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men" in the essay *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. (quoted in Excerpts from Jean Paul Sartre ...www.ashland.edu/~jmoser1/sartre.htm)

All these put him in a pitiable lot sans love, affection; the basic needs of human beings. He suppresses himself for the sake of an imposed imperial identity. In the guise of an authoritarian personality he has submissive mentality. So he becomes easy prey to the trap of one among the "Macaulay's children." In addition to it, existentialism prioritises the real, experiencing human, not the imitating, fake, and pretentious human reflected in Mohan. He does not make choices that will lead to his becoming what he is capable of being. One can plainly sense that colonialism is the undercurrent force in his consciousness that impacts his life. Affirmation to culture of British public school products, he assumes, entitles him liberty. He cannot perceive that this affirmation ends in his self-confinement. It narrows down his choices in his life. Finally, the displacement that Mohan seeks by entangling to the web of colonialism is rejected; the soldiers throw him out of the coupe. Maslow says, "The best way for a person to discover what he ought to do is to find out who and what he is. . . . Many problems simply disappear; many others are easily solved by knowing what is in conformity with one's nature..." (*Existentialism Here and Now - Alfie Kohn* www.alfiekohn.org/miscellaneous/existentialism.htm) The wrong assimilation of Mohan of "who and what he is" leads him to "be glued to the earth" In case of Lachmi, she reflects the cultural self-confidence of Indian society. This is a qualified rejection of the West. Her cultural self-affirmation has great respect for the selfhood of the 'Other'. So she can easily become friendly with the coolie. She justifies Gandhi's version that activism and courage without aggressiveness is perfectly compatible with womanhood, particularly maternity. Nowhere in the story is there an explicit or implicit reflection of sexuality in the image of Lachmi. Her feminine identity reflects motherliness. Mohan disowns his Indianness to match the English people. Lachmi owns up wholeheartedly the Indianness. She has a new mode of defiance. She has her self-esteem and cultural autonomy. Ardently she projects the value of culture in her life as a mode of resistance. As a victim, she protects her humanity and moral sanity. Mohan, a representative of colonial system regards her as an object, whereas she never regards this colonizer as an object. She represents higher order cognition; she treats Mohan as a human. She protects her self-esteem in spite of indignity and exploitation through the secret defiance, the reaffirmation to the right state of mind. Lachmi validates Camus's statement in his essay *The Night of Truth*, i.e, "But man's greatness lies elsewhere. It lies in his decision to be stronger than his condition. And if his condition is unjust, he has only one way of overcoming it, which is to be just himself." (*Neither*

*Victims Nor Executioners | The Blood of Freedom | The Night ...chabrieres.pagesperso-orange.fr/texts/camus\_combat.htm*)

Her fidelity to her inner self, her attitude to freedom with dispensation of this freedom with self-control makes her heroic. She is the courageous Lady Mohan who takes courage to discover the centre of her being and has learnt how to live from the inside. Colonialism is defeated in her mind. The innocence in the form of Lachmi justifies itself by brave confrontation of the modern western colonialism and its psychological aftermath in India. She grows as a human being and cares ‘a pin’s head’ for the confrontation of ‘West’ and ‘East’. She is Gandhi’s visualisation of Indian woman as ‘pure, firm, and self-controlled’. The ‘Other One’ position allotted by Mohan ends in ‘The One’.

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