

CHAPTER II

ACROSS THE SEAWALL

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The novel, Across the Seawall published in 1965, is an introduction to Christopher Koch's favourite themes and techniques. As a widely experienced author, he deals with the characters from Australia and their relationship with Asia and especially with India.

In 1955, Christopher Koch, on his way the United Kingdom, broke his journey and travelled through in India. And so, his depiction of the Indian scene as well as his perceptions sound authentic. This is especially true, as he describes the hero's journey from Madras to Delhi, the people he describes and the seeking poverty that he encounters.

The younger generation of novelist in Australia was completely fed up of the provincial ideas. They were exhausted by events that the previous generation produced in the period when mindlessness was a virtue and cleverness had to be disguised Donald Horne says -

However Australia - more exactly, the younder generations in Australia- seems to be moving towards less provincial, more talent oriented, more Asian conscious attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

It also was not a generation, that allowed a place for the extra-ordinary man who can see new shapes of the future - or the present, and enjoy challenge and to live life at a fuller pitch. This society appeared to shun anything that is at all out of the ordinary. So the young Australians turned towards their mother country or towards the Asian countries to develop their career.

The novel, Across the Seawall is the novel about two Australian Characters : one, the native Australian, i.e. Robert O'Brien and the other, a Latvian girl migrated to Australia i.e. Ilsa Kalnins. Both are careerists who want to develop their career. But their ways are different. O'Brien is a clerk ; as a careerist he is searching a good career job, because -

Position can be of importance in Australia. Among ordinary people there is no necessary esteem for businessmen or high officials but some of the professions.<sup>2</sup>

So he gives up his routine in Australia and decides to go to London with Jimmy Baden, his friend who is an artist in the Radio. Ilsa Kalnins is a married woman, she is a dancer who wants to express herself. So she joins Michael Maleter's company who is heading for Singapore and who has had a night club connection there. O'Brien in his talk, makes it clear -

' I'm ordinary', He said.

' I'm running away from ordinary',<sup>3</sup>

Christopher Koch has developed their story in different settings. The novel has multicultural and multiracial context. His characters are from various countries, they are representative of their respective countries. e.g. the character of Sunder Singh - an Indian but 'westernised' young man. His character is important for the development of the story.

Koch has also introduced another world i.e. the destructive world of Michael, Serge and Ram Singh, who are the exploiters of their own country. Michael is Hungarian, and he is a hypnotist. Serge is the night club entertainer at Ciro, and he has the night club connection in Singapore. They sponge the girls for getting money. Michael clears his attitude.

We are those for whom the ordinary life -  
the comfortable home; the comfortable job-  
will never be enough.<sup>4</sup>

They are the international vagrants. Ilsa is trapped in their company. There is also another girl - Carleen Jackson, a dark Australian girl. Both are trying to be free from these shady characters.

As we are told -

'Michael and he are inclined to lean pretty heavily on those girls, and girls are getting sick of it. - - - As long as the girls have work, Michael and Serge can't starve.'<sup>5</sup>

Carleen Jackson takes help of Sunder to be free from her manager Serge. O'Brien is with Ilsa. Ilsa and O'Brien change their plan of voyage. They are attracted towards India and her mystique. Without paying any heed to Michael's warnings, they change their course of journey and visit India. They live in India as husband and wife in Sunder Singh's house. Carleen goes to Ramsingh, the owner of the night-club-the Everest and joins the club.

In India, O'Brien starts to work on a travel article to sell to an Australian paper but he gets very little money. Ilsa takes her decision to dance in Ramsingh's party to which O'Brien takes objection. A strong quarrel happens between them and they depart from each other.

Meanwhile Michael meets O'Brien when he is wandering on the Delhi Street. O'Brien is rather sick, who suffers from a serious ailment and falls unconscious. Michael takes him to his room. Here the story reaches its climax.

Michael captivates O'Brien as well as Ilsa. As O'Brien rejects his offer to go with him to Bombay he became furious.

And the very next day, O'Brien discovers Ilsa in Michael's company in a terrible condition. She is severely injured. O'Brien sees this and feels very guilty. O'Brien is now totally empty bereft of the girl as well as money.

From the narrator's point of view the story must to end here but the novelist has stretched it further as O'Brien starts his career as a journalist in Australia. After some years Ilsa also returns to Australia but she does nothing she asks O'Brien to accept her but to no avail and it makes Ilsa totally displaced forever.

In the novel, Acroos the Seawall Koch handles various themes in which love remains subsidiary. The problem of love is less important than that of self-identity. Sensuality is juxtaposed against the quest for self knowledge which overshadows the theme of love. The very beginning of the story suggests that O'Brien is going to marry christine, but she is not ready to go abroad as soon. O'Brien wants to develop his career in London and he leaves christine for his quest. It is clear that O'Brien hopes to discover his identity as a journalist in England and not in Australia. This poses question regarding Australia and Australian identity. Obviously, O'Brien thinks that he has no hope in Australia where there is no recognition.

Ilsa also denies to live as a traditional wife, she wants to express herself as a dancer. Due to this self-assertion she has left her husband and a baby which is a secret she tries

to perpetuate. She tells O'Brien her past life with her husband.

A house, a stove, a washing machine - then sit in the house and be bored. And he began to quarrel with me, to be jealous over nothing. It drove me mad. So I started to get night-club work. I like it - it gives me rothing, dancing : I need to express myself. But Eddie objected - - - - -  
 - - - - Last time I told him I would not stay, and I didn't. I had his baby, but still I knew I would leave. Michael offered me this trip just after it was born. So I came. It was no use : I could never stand Ed, although I love the baby.<sup>6</sup>

In the story the money matter or position overshadows love. In India O'Brien and Ilsa are in need of money. So Ilsa decides to dance at Ramsing's Club to get money. O'Brien objects, she shouts -

You are still a clerk.

At least I express myself, dancing.<sup>7</sup>

This also means that Ilsa too is in search of an identity and she feels she finds it as a dancer, and not simply being a wife or mother or a lover.

O'Brien does love Ilsa, but this is achieved in totality of renouncing her other affairs which she cannot agree. As a result, he rejects her love for his career at last.

As far as the setting of the novel is concerned, the novel is set partly in Australia, partly in Indonesia and India. The novel is divided into two parts : the first part is The Wake in which the voyage of the characters from Melbourne to Colombo has been described completely. The second part of the novel Everything for Nothing is set in Indian background.

The voyagers are prominently the continental Europeans returning to their own country. They have hopes about future. Their faces wear the identical expression 'We have a destiny'. The 'Wake' suggests their rejoicing nature, they enjoy their voyage - dancing and singing the songs reminiscent of their own country. O'Brien has his job, his fiancée but still he wants bright future. It is not sufficient for him. So he is going to London. Ilsa is also not happy about her routine. She is interested in her career as a dancer and for that sake she leaves Australia.

The second part 'Everything for Nothing' is very significant. Here the novelist, Koch is very careful about depicting the Indian poverty and disease which is the tourists stereotype.

As they travel from Colombo to the North, Bombay, Delhi they come across the stereotypes of Indian men, women beggars



etc. The poverty, superstitions and disease is everywhere in South, Koch shows it vividly -

- - - these people appeared to be starving  
 Their cheek-bones pushed the flesh out in  
 polished knobs; their legs and arms were  
 stick-like. Flies they seemed not to feel  
 crawled across their faces and into the  
 corners of their mouths; their near black  
 skins were encrusted with ancient dirt, their  
 sapless legs and arms like charred : in human.<sup>8</sup>

He also gives the heartmelting picture of a woman and her child.

She uneasily adjusted the child; a strip of her flimsy wrapping fell away to expose one shrivelled breast, with sudden inspiration, & she pointed at the breast and then at the child, and two English words issued croakingly from her mouth. 'Children, master' And her cupped palm came out again, like a withered leaf.<sup>9</sup>

Sunder feels ashamed of this Southern India which is full of poverty and diseases. He always speaks about prosperity of north. He talks about Five Year Plan and progressive India of Nehru. South is not his India he believes. He has no sympathy towards the beggars who are asking for annas. It is expressed

in his treatment with an old man who begs and touches Sunder -

'Damn you - off !' Sunder put his foot on the  
aldman's shoulder and sent him sprawling away.

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'Disgusting old bastered. He makes me  
ashamed that .....',<sup>10</sup>

North has the rational faculty of India. It brings order to the South. Thus Koch has described the backwardness of India of the nineteen fifties. Southern India is yet to develop. It is full of mysticism and blind beliefs. So Sunder assures his friends that North is the real India.

The important aspect of the main characters in the novel is that main characters, O'Brien, Ilsa and Sunder are displaced, rootless persons. This reinforces the theme of identity in the novel.

Flatness of characterization is the feature of the novel, Across the SeaWall. To ensure the readers pleasure, Koch has established two main characters with great precision and through the other characters he emphasises the main characters.

O'Brien is the protagonist who is in no sense extraordinary. Except an inkling of mystical experience that he has towards the end of the novel, he seems to be a forceless character. His colonial hangover is not forgotten in his forward to a career in England. Also this colonial memory

surfaces when later he is pleased to see the statue of Queen Victoria in Madras.

Koch tells his own story, he has poured his own day-dreams into dramatic forms. He himself is identified with the protagonist. He has developed the character of O'Brien from his personal experience.

O'Brien is the representative of common men in Australia who live in Australia and still they want to be different from other Australians. He is rather submissive never overpowers the situation. As Michael, who is an exploiter and vagrant sums him up -

- - - - you are an emotional dependent. You travelled to escape a life that bored you and trapped you, but you could not do it alone, you needed Jimmy. But when your dependence on Jimmy was no longer possible there was Ilsa - - - - -

'And then you lost Ilsa,' Michael said replacing his glasses like an instructor.

'This of course was an inevitable. And then what were you do ? Remain alone ? But no, not possible for you, Little Australian suburbanite - life's spoilt child ! I do not say this was conscious, Robert, but you came to me because you needed me. It was inevitable.'<sup>11</sup>

O'Brien's character runs in a cyclical pattern - innocence, experience, suffering and rebirth. His linear voyage is broken by his quest for Ilsa and he decides to visit India. But there he suffers much from poverty and diseases. Then he goes back ~~to~~ Australia and starts his career as a journalist. Perhaps, there is a promise of a bright future for him with all that experience behind him.

After the World War II, the people migrated to Australia as regugees. Ilsa belongs to these people. She is a Latvian girl. Her childhood was shattered by the world war II. Her father was killed and she came to Australia with her mother. Her married life was also not happy one. She is a vagrant war child forever displaced.

Ilsa is a typical Australian woman who thinks of better happy life. About Australian woman Donalad Horne says -

Australian woman is looking for good life the right and satisfying way of doing this; who is not concerned with her husband's career; she does not use her 'home' to keep him in his job but to build a world in which she believes.<sup>11</sup>

Ilsa loves O'Brien but she is bound to Australian Social Customs about remarriage. Her strong sense of chris-tarian makes O'Brien either to wait or call the marriage off.

The main facts of human life are five : birth, food, love, sleep and death. As E.M. Forster says -

When human beings love they try to get something. They also try to give something, and this double aim makes love more complicated,<sup>12</sup>

This is applicable to Ilsa; because she loves O'Brien <sup>is</sup> but at the same time she loves position and money; this/the cause of her downfall. She is in search of love and hopeful about it but 'love is a fiction she dreamed about, and could-not live.' She is saint and sinner also. Her quest for love makes her to love many persons but she is unfulfilled. She does not get true love for which she yearns. Though she is judged as a flirt she is pure in love, Ilse's lot is tragic since, she is, first, a displaced and rootless person, second, she is left her husband but more grievously she has left behind her child; and, thirdly, she remains unfulfilled as a lover as well as a careerist dancer.

Sundar's character is a temperal creation of Koch. Sunder is the representative of Northern India. He belongs to Sikh turban against his religion, i.e. he is a renegade Sikh. He is secular minded rather westernised in his thinking. Still he has love for his mother country.

Sunder is another displaced 'renegade sikh' returning home to find his own identity. First he has been Australia in search of fortune but is forced to return home to accept the new state, to be an Indian and feel fulfilled.

Ram Singh, Michael and Serge are in sleazy business and businessmen. They are the agents who recruit the girls from Australia and send them off to Singapore, Hongkong etc. They use the girls for getting money. In a sense, these are 'bad' characters compared with the 'good' character like D' Brien and Ilsa etc.; in the sense that Koch has attempted any deeper analysis of the criminal characters. To that extent, they are 'flat' characters.

As for the relationships between the Australians and Indians, it should be based on mutual trust and fellow-feeling, but O'Brien's attitude seems to be racist, as Sunder Singh says to O'Brien -

Scratch you people hard enough and the  
Pukka Sahib comes out doesn't it ?<sup>12</sup>

Thus Indians look at the Australians like the  
British.

In order to present the case of his protagonist Koch uses various techniques. As O'Brien seems to be representing Koch as a journalist. His character seems to be quite convincing. He cannot overcome the situation around him.

The Indian poverty and social ethos are presented in stereo type manner. While due care is taken to make the protagonist and other characters sufficiently individua-lised, he seems to be inclined to handle the social and spiri-  
tual problems is an entertaining manner in his novel.

The sotry, of course, is important. It has a realistic structure and Koch has handled it in the particular form of realistic narrative technique.

The novel is fully openended. It is inconclusive suggesting different possibilities of future developments. He ends his story where the novel begins. The structurally, the novel has a cyclical pattern; innocence, commitment, suffering and rebirth.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Horne, Donald. The Lucky Country , Australia in the sixties, Penguin Books, 1965 Adelaide P.10
2. Ibid, P- 74
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4. Ibid, P. 35
5. Ibid., P. 61
6. Ibid., P. 53
7. Ibid., P. 118
8. Ibid., P. 83
9. Ibid., P. 84
10. Ibid., P.93
11. Horne, Donald. The Lucky Country Penguin Books 1965, Adlaide. P. 86.
12. Forster, E.M. Aspects of the Novel . 1962, New York. P. 59

