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Book Review: A Day in the Life of Ghulam Sarwar and Other Stories

By Vijay Prakash Singh

**Reviewed By
Ekta Gupta.**

A Day in the Life of Ghulam Sarwar and other stories is the first collection of short stories by Vijay Prakash Singh. He is a Professor in the Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow.

It is a collection of fourteen stories which is going to penetrate the heart of the reader with its sharpness of language and its realistic descriptions. The language used in the narration is appealing and striking and makes you re-read the stories to squeeze the pleasure out of it. The greatness of the author lies in the art of storytelling. Here the author exceeds all the parameters to measure it. The simplicity of language does not compromise with the complexity of meanings. The surface stories have layers of meanings to unravel which makes it an intellectual piece of work. All the stories are told in such a way that one can easily visualize them to happen.

The book is written on many issues like child marriage, sexual abuse, flesh trade, issues of marriage, dowry, forced marriages, environmental disorder, political unrest, draught, poverty, love, betrayal and many other with feminist inclinations. The author is well aware of the fact that literature is not just for entertainment but to sensitize the generation. This book is a fine example of this awareness.

The author's specialization is in travel writings and in the book one can find the traces of such specialization. It seems like the book is the essence of the author's lifelong experiences. The stories are set in the popular cities of India as Lucknow, Kanpur, Delhi, Hyderabad, Ayodhya and many other cities and villages. The painstaking portrayal of these places shows a deep familiarity of the author with them.

The style of writing is excellent for readers to understand. The characters in the book like Ghulam Sarwar, Zohra, and Zareen in *A Day in the Life of Ghulam Sarwar*; Mansi and Shyam in *Curfew*; Sufia Begum in *The House of Sufia Begum*; Ramasre in *Rain*; Begum Sahiba or Bibi in *A Shawl for My Daughter*; Baori in *Baori, The Crazy One*; Shireen in *Shireen*; Gulabo and Bansi in *Dawn*; Lawaris Begum in *Lawaris Begum*; Madho in *A Village of Happiness*; Kausar Jehan and Nawab Nooruddin Haider in *Lal Baradari*; are all lifelike and can be seen in daily life easily with the stories untold. All the stories are the mirror to the society. All of them appeal to the emotions and sensibilities of the reader.

The book's characters, settings, plots, and incidents are quite convincing and probable. The stories are woven around the existing social, political and personal issues. That makes the book relevant for contemporary age. Every story takes up a different trajectory but never leaves the grounds of human reality. It is a realistic book. The author's story telling skills are amazing and grip the reader till the very end. The element of what happens next is prevalent throughout the stories. The tone fluctuates occasionally. At times it is calm contemplative and philosophical and other times there is aggressive towards the wrongs of the society.

In order to give a brief insight about the stories in the collection I am giving a brief account of them. The first and the title story in the series *A day in the Life of Ghulam Sarwar* is set in Hyderabad. It establishes a comparison between the catastrophic conditions of the historical monuments with the similar condition of Ghulam Sarwar. It compresses the entire life of Ghulam Sarwar in one day. It very poignantly depicts the anguish and helplessness of a father and life spirit of a daughter. This story can stir the soul of the reader with its unanswered naked questions.

Curfew lets you imagine the riots of Ayodhya. It critiques on the religious fundamentalism and its consequences. The character of Mansi is that of strength and patience. It deals with her fears, anxieties, depression, love, and power. The end of the story can fill someone's eyes with tears and heart with pride for this mother.

The House of Sufia Begum is the haunting tale of cursed woman. It is heart rendering tale of love, betrayal, strength, weakness, lust, and sublimated love. It makes one think about the actual meaning and concept of love. Toward the end it takes a philosophical stance and gives ample food for thought.

Rain presents a bleak and gloomy picture of society where the humanity has thoroughly exhausted. It again asks end number of questions and leaves the resolution for the readers to think. It deals with draught and its consequent effects as starvation, prostitution, suicide, and poverty. In the grip of these heart breaking circumstances the familial bond become null and void. Fathers, husbands, and brothers are forced to sell their daughters, wives and sisters. It also questions the so called security in marriage institution.

A Shawl for My Daughter talks about hardships, loneliness, and pain of a single parent. It also brings into light the need of a companion in old age. With its clarity of thought it touches the heart on a different level.

Baori, The Crazy One is one of the most affecting and distressing stories of the collection. It takes up the issue of early and matchless marriages and their miserable consequences. The balance of love, trust, and understanding forms the very core of the

marriage. The story shows what happens when this equilibrium vanishes. The story burns with these issues and seeks for the solutions in readers mind.

Shireenis another tale in the series which deals with the themes of war and exile from a woman's perspective. It explores the terribly vulnerable condition of a woman in a helplessly insecure society. It is about an Afghan refugee who comes to India with the hope of life and peace. She does not accept her fate but fights against it. It is an exceptionally moving tale of the courage and strength of a woman who asserts herself with her choices and lives them.

Dawn shows the adversities of labor life. It brilliantly raises the troubles of their painful existence. A life of exhausting labor, starving nights, frozen hearts and full of lacks forms the essence of their lives and stains the pages of the book. The story presents the irony where in the lap of materially prosperous city these unfortunates are failed to get the basic things in life.

The tale of *Lawaris Begum* gives a glimpse of a miserable life. The story is full of descriptions about begum. These descriptions create many images in the mind and nothing specifically said about the actual incidents. The narrator of the story himself wonders if could gather the courage to ask Begum about her life. Throughout the story the mystery continues and this suspense makes the reading more enjoyable.

A Village of Happiness foregrounds the urban bankruptcy in the extraordinarily modern age. The story juxtaposes the two altogether different realms- one materially rich and the other spiritually. Meanwhile it does not privilege one over the other but demonstrates the inherent limitations of both and pleads for balance between the two.

The Mango Orchard depicts the human encroachment upon nature. It does not just talk about the mango orchard but the entire nature itself. The story is narrated by a lover of nature. His hearts breaks with the destruction of the natural beauty around him. The story very touchingly comments upon the human greed and self-destructing tendencies.

Flight echoes the short story of the same name written by American novelist John Steinbeck. It deals with the issues of illiteracy, child labor, and poverty. It throws light upon the back breaking task of making money by the kids who sell in the trains. It very realistically portrays the scene of a train journey. The future of these children is nothing. Their dreams are vanishing with their growing age. They have no guidance to work for themselves. Ridden with circumstances they waste their time in such frivolous activities. It efficiently handles the children's psyche, fears, anxiety and child abuse.

A Life in Metro as the name suggests speaks about the life in metro cities. The reducing sensitivities, moral degradation, and the individualistic obsessions are the issues of grave concern and damaging the human peace and happiness. The story is the

manifestation of the author's anger and frustration towards such issues. It is a satire on the animalistic tendencies of human beings.

Lal Baradari is a true account of the life of Begum Kausar and Nawab Nooruddin Haider of Awadh. It very elegantly presents the contrast between the personal and political decline of the royal family of Awadh. It gives a heart rendering account of the marital life of the Nawab and the Begum on the one hand and the British conspiracy to extract Nawab's power on the other. It is about love, betrayal, court intrigues, and political upheaval of Awadh. It also reveals the hypocrisy of the royal families. The ruinous end of the story penetrates the heart with its torments and irony.

Thus the book has various flavors of stories which make it a varied collection of stories. All the stories are colored with Indian essence. The book is the perfect combination of fact and imagination. It keeps you grounded in reality and gives you reading pleasure simultaneously.

Work Cited:

Singh, Vijay Prakash. *A Day in the Life of Ghulam Sarwar and other stories*. Calcutta: Writer's workshop, 2014. Print.