

Khushwant Singh's Narrative Techniques in Train to Pakistan, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale and Delhi

Abdul Majeed Dar

Ph.D. Research Scholar, School of Languages, Literature and Society (Department of English),
Jaipur National University, Jaipur, India

Abstract

Khushwant Singh is a remarkable personality both as a man and as writer of prose and fiction for he has written what he feels and believes to be right whether those who read him like it or not. He has the narrative art of his own that is one of the distinguishing features of his art as a writer of fiction. He is stalwart neither as a novelist nor as a short story writer, but he has produced fiction which is, though meagre in output, is always readable. A study of Khushwant Singh's novels made his readers realize that he was a born storyteller who had been late in picking up his pen as a novelist. Thus, this paper would analyze and assess the narrative art of Khushwant Singh as evidenced by his three novels, Train To Pakistan, I Shall Not Hear The Nightingale and Delhi.

Key Words: Queer Personality, Fiction, Stalwart, Novelist

Introduction

Train To Pakistan is Khushwant Singh's first novel but in more senses than one it is also the best one. It has not lost popularity among its readers ever since its first publication under the title *Mano Majra* (1956): Reading Train To Pakistan in 2018, sixty- two years after it was written, one finds that the passage of time has not in the least diminished the freshness of this excellent novel. The book continues to be one that any reader of fiction would greatly enjoy. It deserves to be recognized as a classic.

The novel has gripped the attention of more than six decades of readers for many reasons. But what distinguishes Khushwant Singh's novels in general and Train to Pakistan in particular is his narrative art. When he wrote this novel, he had not written much in the field of fiction - a few short stories only - but this small novel brought him in the forefront of English novel, writing in India. There may be a controversy about the worth of the themes of his novels, but there is almost

unanimity among readers and critics that he is certainly a very great narrative artist. One of the constituents of the narrative art of a novelist is the selection of titles. For a title helps an author of any discipline to attract the attention of the readers provided it is catching and proves in the course of reading that it is significant, apt, and suggests the theme implicitly, if not explicitly. There is little doubt about the significance of the title Train To Pakistan. The novel was originally titled as Mano Majra. Even this title was suggestive because the action of the novel centres round the village Mano Majra which, according to Khushwant Singh, is a small village.

Thus the novel opens with the description of a small village known for its communal harmony suggesting the unity in diversity marking the life of India since times immemorial. However Khushwant Singh changed his mind and altered the title of the novel to Train To Pakistan. This change of title must not have been without reason. He must have brooded over the fact that a small village like Mano Majra leads a static and monotonous life. This monotony was constantly punctuated by up and down trains as well as goods trains passing through Mano Majra.

The depiction of the punctuation of human life by trains is important in the sense that the change from Mano Majra to trains is the change from fixity to dynamism. The train to Pakistan stands for movement of men and women moving to various places. Movement also involves risks to life and property. Thus the train is going to decide not only the destiny of individuals moving on it but also of the newly formed nations - India and Pakistan. This significance of the title makes us realize the importance that Khushwant Singh gave to this aspect of his narrative art. The train has also rendered significance to the title by implying the impact of machines on the calm and quiet, simple and self-satisfied life of villagers who live as one unit irrespective of their different religions. Machines, the title suggests by referring to a country, break unity, damage human values, dehumanize humanity and transport man as much away from God as they can. The individuals moving on the train do not seem to know whether they will reach their destinations and settle there as peacefully and contentedly as they have been living here. However, the title of the novel catches the attention of readers and critics and lingers long in their memory - they may not keep in their minds contents of the book, their minds do not let slip the title and here lies the beauty of narrative technique used by Khushwant Sing in his novels.

The plot of I Shall Not Hear The Nightingale is not as well constructed as that of Train To Pakistan. However the former is a better work than the latter so far as their sense of time, and the social milieu are concerned. As Iyengar and Nandakumar have said, The figure of Sabhrai wholly redeems the dimness and murkiness of the general atmosphere. The fever of sensuality is easier to describe than the radiance of Faith, and this is the reason why Sabhrai almost 'steals' the novel. The novel is, as has been suggested earlier, a study of real life and has to be read as an album of the life

Khushwant Singh's Narrative Techniques in *Train to Pakistan*, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* and *Delhi*

of a middleclass religious Sikh family. Some of these photographs leave an indelible impression upon the mind of the reader. Whether it is the episode at the cinema hall revealing Madan's weakness or reference to the religious ceremonies, the brutal practices of the police or the sexual exploitation of superstitious women by religious heads, we read about many events that are convincing and believable. The characters are likewise life-like. In fact Khushwant Singh is a wonderful observer of life and is endowed with the gift of 'putting things across' in such a way that the reader cannot afford to miss what the novelist wants to convey: Khushwant Singh observes 'as with a microscope, and records his findings without any squeamishness; and his analysis of the complex of relationships within the family and in the wider world, and his unravelling of the tangle of conflicting loyalties, show both understanding and skill. Humour is blended with brutality, mere sentiment is eschewed, and the picture that emerges is arresting as well as amusing. The triumph of the book is really the portrait of Sabhrai, Buta Singh's wife.

Delhi, the third novel of Khushwant Singh, is a beautiful blending of love, lust, sex, hate, vendetta, violence and tears. In spite of being a historical novel it is less realistic and more romantic than the earlier novels of Khushwant Singh. However the novel is not to be taken as a fairy-book – it overtakes us with its realism, comedy and high seriousness. The book is a portrait-gallery of many of those who were responsible for strengthening or weakening, vitalizing or famishing the life of Delhi from time to time although the novelist is above partiality and prejudices. It is supposed to be a narration in the first person to allow emperors and saints, poets and sahibs and many others to reveal their character. An iconoclast, Khushwant Singh portrays various rulers of Delhi so as to strip them of their conventional halo and dignity.

Narrative Technique in *Train to Pakistan*

The significance of the title of the novel is a part of a well-made, architectonically sound novel. A study of the first novel, *Train To Pakistan* reveals that Khushwant Singh is without doubt an accomplished craftsman in the world of Indian English fiction. The shortcomings of the structure of the novel are the compulsions of Khushwant Singh's limitations as a novelist. The structure of the novel is well-constructed and the plot is built more at the emotional level than at the level of characters and incidents introduced: The structure of the novel in a conventional pattern may imply the process and form of development of action and character. The idea of structure includes, and covers areas of the plot, the sequence of events, the narrative and episodic arrangements. But this is not all. Form and structure are elusive and elastic concepts which continue to assume new dimensions.

A study of *Train to Pakistan* from the point of view of structure reveals that its structure is as conventional and traditional as otherwise. As it emerges out of a chronological sequence of time, it has the elements of traditional structure. But it ceases to be conventional because 'an intangible current of values' carries it away. Had it been limited by the areas of action and character it would have become a traditional structure; but it goes beyond the bounds of action and character to enter the area of value judgment. So Shahane has rightly remarked that 'the architectonics of *Train To Pakistan* evolves out of the combination of the traditional structural pattern with value judgments.' If one agrees with I. A. Richards, the creative literature is a large storehouse of recorded values. In *Train To Pakistan*, one finds a treasure of creatively expressed values. The worth of the novel is immensely enhanced by an aesthetic blend of values and realistic and true-to-life episodes.

The novel may be a small slice, one can easily discern in it something of Fielding and something of Austen in the sense that it is as much a novel of action and character as a dramatic novel for we discover in it growth in space and movement in time allowing it to develop sometimes in one aspect and sometimes in the other. This diversity and alternation between the dramatic and the character- based narration enlarges the possibilities of the narrative art of Khushwant Singh.

The importance of structure in the narrative art cannot be overemphasized, but it is certainly an aspect which cannot be dealt with cursorily. As we survey the narrative we discover that the structure of the novel unfolds itself into a drama in four acts, each of the four parts of the novel signifying one act of a well-made play. The first act of the drama evolves out of that dacoity which sets the ball of action rolling. The novelist uses all his art and imaginative faculty to render realistically the village dacoity: "The men came out. One of them fired two shots in the air. Women stopped wailing. Dogs stopped barking. The village was silenced."(10) In our world getting cruel and dehumanized day by day, this crime does not mean much but it enables the novelist to let the story move in the direction to which he wants it to move. We shall talk about its symbolic significance later in the chapter. But for this normal looking feature of villages, the novelist would not have succeeded in bringing the type of exposition that he has done. The seed has been sown, it will germinate, grow into a plant and thereafter a tree bearing fruits. The seed is of a poisonous tree - the fruits can be neither sweet nor healthful. The novelist uses his narrative faculty to create a situation in which the dacoit succeeds in dropping hints that Juggat Singh alias Jugga, a budmas number ten, has committed the crime. Khushwant Singh's narrative art owes much to the father of English novel Henry Fielding who sought in his novels to minimise the use of romance and present life as it is supposed to be lived. A book of romantic fiction presents life as readers would like to have it: it is more picturesque, more adventurous, more heroic than the actual. The novelist writing romantic fiction intends to transport the reader into the land of imagination and allows his

Khushwant Singh's Narrative Techniques in *Train to Pakistan*, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* and
Delhi

imagination to run wild. Khushwant Singh has chosen characters who are commonplace but vivid, credible and true to life and are foolish or worldly-wise, corrupt and immoral as also lovers of old values as the occasion demands. They seem to come out of the Indian context and begin to act and react, show their likings and dislikes so naturally as if they were not the sons and daughters of the author's imagination: The characters are vivid and highly credible, and Khushwant Singh keeps them going magnificently on two levels: in their quotidian matrix compounded of their passions of love and revenge, their tremendous sense of belonging to a village community, and their insolence and heroism; and then again on the wide stage set by the tornado that breaks on their lives in the shape of the catastrophic events of the partition of India in 1947. The hero and the heroine of the novel *Train To Pakistan* have also been realistically drawn. "Train" has been used as a significant symbol in the novel A veritable almanac and time- guide for the people of Mano Majra in normal times, it acquires sinister dimensions when its smooth running in and out of the village is disturbed in the wake of partition.

Another aspect of the narrative art of Khushwant Singh that makes *Train to Pakistan* readable is his use of humour and pathos. I must make it clear that the novel is not remarkably rich in either humour or pathos. But taking into consideration the theme, the ending and the small size of the book, the element of pathos is fairly adequate whereas humour is very scanty. One very prominent example of humour in the novel serves as a source of tragic relief. It occurs when Jugga has been implicated in the murder of Lala Ram Lal, and the police have refused to accept Jugga's mother producing the packet of the broken bangles left by Malli as a proof of his innocence.

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* has a narrative pattern that has much to do with the creation of atmosphere enabling the novelist to present much more, and that too very potently and piercingly what could not have been conveyed so well even if the novelist had wasted a large number of words. The description of the river Sutlej spreading wide seems at first an attempt to acquaint the reader with the beauty of the net of rivers spreading through the Punjab; but later on we realize that the novelist had described it only to let us know that it was to be a means of carrying dead bodies of men and animals from Pakistan; the knowledge about it aggravates the riots on the Indian side of the Punjab. If the novelist talks about the birds of the day, it is about cawing crows: flying bats are shown quarrelling for their perches.

Khushwant Singh has borrowed from Henry Fielding that realism which enables a novelist to create the illusion that he is reflecting life itself. Stark realism marks *Train to Pakistan* as the novelist portrays powerfully and convincingly the deep impact of the partition upon the countrymen

in general and the villages on the border in particular. This realism has made the book a documentary novel.

Finally, Khushwant Singh deserves full credit for his objectivity and impartiality. In spite of being a Sikh, the most tortured community during the partition, he has shown how a Sikh is capable of sacrificing his life to save the life of his non-Sikh beloved.

Narrative Technique in I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale

It is just possible that this novel could not draw the attention of the reading public partly because he had added no new feather to his narrative art which was almost the same as that of *Train to Pakistan*. There was also no improvement in it either. This lack of novelty in the area of narrative art coupled with a smaller canvas resulted in absence of the phenomenal success which this novel might have achieved. Moreover, the novel had certain blemishes which went a long way in limiting the popularity of *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*: that the characters, but for Sabhrai, live without their individuality and are flat and incapable of growing and learning from their experiences is one reason of the weaknesses of the novel does not lessen the value of the narrative art of the novelist.

The symbolic significance of the title *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* is not all; the title is also significant in the sense that it implies the theme as well as the ending of the novel. It has to be admitted that the plot of the novel is not as well made as that of *Train to Pakistan*. A plot, as Forster has very ably pointed out, is the arrangement of characters and incidents with emphasis on casualty; in other words, when a work of fiction or drama has its theme, action, characterization and other elements so arranged as to give an idea of architectonic quality in it, it is said to have good plot construction. Such a work has a well-defined beginning [exposition], middle [conflict and climax] and end [resolution].

Besides exhibitionism sex anecdotes also mark the narrative art of Khushwant Singh. The journalist in Khushwant Singh makes him talk of the art of making love. Thus:

In the land of the *Kama Sutra* (the sacred Hindu thesis on the art of love) and phallus worship, sex is practiced in conditions which provide neither the time nor the opportunity for a man to rouse the passions of his woman to that fever heat which makes her yearn for lusty fulfilment. The institution of the honeymoon where a young married couple can make each other's physical acquaintance is unknown except among the anglicized upper middle class. For the rest, a newly married girl's first few experiences follow a soulless pattern. To the mass of Indian womanhood, the sixty-five ways of kissing and petting, the thirty-seven postures of the sex act so beautifully portrayed in stone on temple walls make as much sense

Khushwant Singh's Narrative Techniques in Train to Pakistan, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale and Delhi

as a Greek translation of the treatise Kama Sutra itself. Unfulfilled sexual impulses result in an obsession with sex and in many perversions which result from frustration: sadism, masochism and most common of all, exhibitionism. (42-43)

Khushwant Singh's narrative art gains strength from his wonderful capacity to make use of gestures and such movements of the body and mind as excite passion and try to bare the psychology of characters in such a way that the novelist is able to grip the attention of his readers more tightly. For instance, towards the close of chapter I of the novel, Sher Singh is shown inclined to sleep. Champak's references to Mundoo's seeing her nude have failed to rouse his passion notwithstanding her explicit suggestions of her intention to mate.

Simplicity and lucidity, commonly used idioms and phrases, small sentences mark the style of Khushwant Singh in I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale. But Khushwant Singh is notorious for double talk which is becoming common in use in recent literature and films alike. Profuse use of words and phrases of abuse and obscene gestures and expressions mar some of the effect though his style is decked and beautified by a large number of figures of speech. Khushwant Singh is fond of using similes in particular.

The figures of speech make his otherwise prosaic style charming. His use of phrases, proverbs and sayings in Hindi translated into English and use of some Hindi words and phrases directly bring Indianness to his style.

Khushwant Singh has used irony as one of his piercing, powerful and profound weapons. Even some names are ironical. Irony of situation is remarkably present in the novel; the novelist acquaints us with irony by making certain remarks. As we go through the narrative we come to the conclusion that irony is heaped upon irony in the novel. Besides the irony of situation we also come across many examples of irony of expression. The novelist is very strong in the exposure of hypocrisy which is perhaps another method of employing irony.

But what carries the reader of I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale to the world of beauty from the world of base desires is the novelist's love of nature which becomes evident from the title itself. The novel is also remarkable from the point of view of very purifying and sublime passages from the Adi Granth whether they are related to seasons or to the relationship of human soul to the almighty God. They make us free from the fear of death by telling us that birth separates us from God while after death human soul is united to her Lord, she is a bride welcomed in the Master's Mansion finding true Lord and love.

Narrative Technique in Delhi

Khushwant Singh is not the only novelist to choose a city as a hero. But what makes Delhi a human document in which the novelist shows wonderful insight into the heart and soul of the city and its people as various phases of existence is Khushwant Singh's narrative art which makes us realize, as though in the first hand, that it is not a presentation of historical facts. Delhi is the story of a grand failure, the failure of a city and its inhabitants, its past and its present. It is the story of a people who have failed to exploit their potential; a society which has failed to appropriate for itself values that make a people discover and realize themselves; a civilization that has crumbled before attaining its true destiny. Traces of the glory that could have been, serve to heighten one's sense of the magnitude of the failure. In his attempt to articulate the past historically Khushwant Singh has been careful to liberate the text from historical conventions - his attempt is not to be true to facts but faithful to his readers who should not find it a dull some, monotonous account of those persons, places and events in which they should have no interest. So the novelist has done everything to make it lively and absorbing.

The presentation of the novel Delhi is such that several readers may interpret it differently: whereas some will enjoy it as a historical novel that has so many obscene touches, others may read it as a 'veiled autobiography of a master womanizer set against the backdrop of Delhi's history'. For many others the novel will be a book in the inglorious mode in which 'the glorious and the inglorious, the refined and the vulgar, the factual and the fictional coalesce into an incongruous mixture' For a historical novel is "a form of fictional narrative which reconstructs history and re-creates it imaginatively. Both historical and fictional characters may appear. Though writing fiction, the good historical novelist researches his or her chosen period thoroughly and strives for verisimilitude". If we judge Delhi from this point of view, we shall have to admit that it is not strictly a historical novel in spite of uniqueness in conception and execution. It is so because: Khushwant Singh sounds realistic from the very first page. His introduction to Delhi is as realistic as his first encounter with Bhagmati:

while Delhi is inhabited by people who 'spit phlegm and bloody betel juice,' 'urinate and defecate whenever and wherever the urge takes them,' Bhagmati is dark with pock marks: She is short and squat; her teeth are uneven and yellowed as a result of chewing tobacco and smoking beedis. Her clothes are loud , her voice louder; her speech bawdy and her manners worse.(1)

But the most realistic picture that Khushwant Singh has drawn in this novel is, to my mind, that which describes the life of the untouchables. There is the same note of stark realism when one of the untouchables tells us the pathos of his life - they were without oil to light their homes and had

Khushwant Singh's Narrative Techniques in *Train to Pakistan*, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* and *Delhi*

no temples to go to say their prayers. The reference to Shahjahan's love of women is as realistic as the following statement: His favourite was a queen whom he kept pregnant from the day he married her. In the fourteen years they were married she had fourteen sons and daughters. She couldn't take any more and died giving birth to her fourteenth child. (125)

There is also symbolism when Nihal Singh describes the arrest of Mirza Mughal Bahadur, Mirza Abu Bakr and Mirza Khizr Sultan. As the three are being carried away, the scene presents symbolically the sunset of the Mughal Empire. (308)

The comic and ironic mode of the novelist help him and readers rise above prejudices, and lighten the weight of the subject. The predicament of Musaddi Lal, presented in a comic manner, speaks of him and also of many: "I was disowned by the Hindus and shunned by my wife. I was exploited by the Muslims who disdained my company. Indeed I was like a hijda who was neither one thing nor another but could be misused by everyone." (34). Besides Khushwant Singh's own style is also very poetical. For example Aurangzeb's monologue has such passages as the following:

We knew that kingship knows no kinship. No bridge of affection spans the abyss that separates a monarch from his sons; no bonds of affection exist between the sons of Kings. Sired though they may have been by the same loins, lain in succession in the same womb and suckled the same breasts, no sooner were they old enough to know the world than they understood that they must destroy their siblings or be destroyed themselves. (152-3)

Conclusion

One of the main factors of Khushwant Singh's success as a writer of fiction is his narrative art which has greater credit than the originality of his ideas in his short stories and novels. His fiction is almost entirely free from humbug, hypocrisy, prudishness and inhibitions. The aspect of the narrative art of Khushwant Singh which has earned him the irreverent title 'the dirty old man' is his exhibitionism and return to scenes and anecdotes relating to marital and extramarital sexual life boldly presented by him without any reservation and inhibitions. Khushwant Singh, though at the pinnacle of writing in India, has achieved the singular distinction of being the most popular columnist and one of the bestselling authors as a result of his talent and ability and not as a result of the blessings of some god-father.

Train To Pakistan (1956), first titled as *Mano Majra*, also proved to be the most successful one with its good plot and absorbing narrative, realism and symbolism, simple mode of expression

and style. The novel is a truthful, touching and tragic rendering of the traumatic event of partition of India in 1947.

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale (1959), is a powerful portrayal of the inner tensions and external movements in the early nineteen forties as well as the lure of violence and paradox of heroism. Besides, in this novel, the novelist has sought to study the teen-age psychology. In spite of its being a very readable novel, it failed to evoke from the readers the response that *Train To Pakistan* had done.

Khushwant Singh's third novel, *Delhi*, is, as he has himself said, is a beautiful blending of love, lust, sex, hate, vendetta, violence and tears. Historical only in semblance, *Delhi* is less realistic and more romantic than the earlier novels of Khushwant Singh. But it does not mean that it is a fairytale - it overtakes the reader with its realism, comedy and high seriousness. The book is a portrait gallery of many of those who were responsible for strengthening or weakening, vitalizing or famishing the life of Delhi from time to time

References

1. Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Macmillan India Ltd. 2000.
2. Bhatnagar, Dr. K. C. *Realism in Major Inda-English Fiction*, Bareilly Prakash Book Depot. 1990.
3. Iyengar, K. R. S. and Prema Nandakumar. *Indian Writing in English*. Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1983.
4. Khushwant Singh. *Train to Pakistan*. Times Books International. 1989.
5. ---, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Times Books International, 1989.
6. ---, *Delhi*. Penguin Books, 1990.
7. Mukherjee, M. (ed) *Considerations*. Allied Publishers, 1974.
8. Naik, M. K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. Sahitya Akademi, 1982.
9. ---, (ed) *Critical Essays on Writing in English*. Madras Macmillan, 1977.
10. Pathak, R. S. (ed) *Recent Indian Fiction*. Prestige Books. 1996
11. ---, (ed) *Indian Fiction of the Nineties*. Creative Books, 1997.
12. Shahane, V. A. *Khushwant Singh*. Twayne Publishers Inc., 1972.