

Exploration of Satire, Social Problems and Issues in the Works of Khushwant Singh

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Abstract

They say, to err is Human, to forgive is Divine. This dictum is a universally accepted one. Yet there are exceptions. What will be the consequence if one goes on committing mistakes throughout? Can he be forgiven forever? Though not punished severely, at least he should be informed of his follies. One of the best ways to make him aware of his frailties is to ridicule and laugh at him. This approach is termed as satire. Though the paper focuses on the Satire, which is established hallmark of Khushwant Singh's fictional works, however this paper will also highlight in detail the social problems and issues, belief in superstition, initiation of young minds into sex, Jealousy and discrimination which are the main aspects that Khushwant Singh criticizes in his works.

Key Words: Follies, Satire, Mano Majra, Politically Resurgent

Introduction

It is generally agreed that people laugh when they see or hear something funny. But all will not find as such things equally funny. Things which strike one group as humorous may not strike the same to the other. Humorous responses vary widely and people tend to find different things funny and exercise this ability in varying degrees. Therefore to amuse and delight and to bring a reform is indeed a difficult task for a satirist. Long defines Satire as, "a literary work which searches out the fault of men or institution in order to hold them up to ridicule". According to Dryden, "the true end of satire is the amendment of vices by correction". In Defoe's words, "the end of satire is Reformation: and the Author, though he doubts the work of Conversion is at a general stop, has put his Hand to the Plow". Both Dryden and Defoe believed that satire can heal and restore. 'Satire', says Ian Jack, "is boom of the instinct to protest; it is protest that becomes art". With his characteristic pessimism Swift had fewer doubts. In the preface to *The Battle of the Books*

(17041 he wrote: ‘Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own, which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it.’ And at a later date (1728) he saw satire at best as a kind of moral policeman restraining the righteous but helpless against the wicked, assisting to help those who were virtuous of virtue but never rescuing the vicious.

The iconoclastic stance or the satirical mode is only one aspect of Singh’s creative art; certainly, it is the most important one. He, of course, holds the mirror to India’s and the world’s, “Monsters and Monstrosities”; but he also knows that the world is not monopolized by monsters only. There are also angels. As a realist, he faces the monsters, exposes them, ridicules them, and makes them the targets of his rapier thrusts and biting irony. As a humanist, he realizes and acknowledges the principle that man will supersede all the monsters and establish the supremacy of the moral law. Man is the crowning glory of creation, and, though he is partly beast, he is also partly angel. In moments of crisis, the angelic in man will triumph over the beastly element in him. This is indeed the moral triumph of man so forcefully demonstrated in *Train to Pakistan*. (Shahane, *Mind*, 150-151)

Khushwant Singh is a social critic because the purpose of his writing was to present social problems. He is one of the leading novelists of the modern age. His novels express a powerful satire on the political and social hypocrisies. By the quality of his writing, he has achieved international fame and recognition. Like G.B. Shaw, his purpose of writing was to present the shortcomings of society in a humorous manner. But the element of humour did not affect the truth that he wanted to convey. As a patriot, he loved his country with its customs and traditions but at the slightest opportunity he did not hesitate to condemn those customs and traditions which are responsible for the miseries of common people. Due to his attempt at analyzing social and political problems of his era, his idealism has been well blended with realism. Like other literary figures, he too believed that materialism is an obstacle towards achieving peace of mind. Dr. Shahane Vasant is of the opinion that: He is a humourist and a realist one, and his stories reveal this dual artistic power. The stories exemplify his gentle irony and his faculty of being ironical at the expense of his own countrymen. (Shahane, *Comic*, 33)

Satire was the established hallmark of his fictional works. He firmly believed that the basis of true satire lies not merely in the fun arising out of the incongruity of words or situation or character, but in the deeper contrasts and incongruities of life itself. The predominant quality of Khushwant Singh is his comic spirit, informed by the sense of incongruity and by the bewildering

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phenomena of contradictions in life. Modern man is up against. He is primarily preoccupied with the incongruities of life in a lighter vein and with the comic spirit that is generated from the schism between what men are and what they seem - by the gulf that divides appearance from reality. (Shahane, Comic, 67). This finds its clearest expression in the works of Khushwant Singh, which brings out his tolerant, humane and sympathetic understanding of human weaknesses and oddities.

Khushwant Singh has never ceased to be a highly controversial writer, ever since he started his literary career. His wide experience in of civilization, culture and histories across the world, has earned him a coveted place along with the most celebrated post-modern writers in exploring and interrogating the post-colonial and post-imperial issues and realities that have shaped the contemporary societies and their politics. He has charted his speculative and skeptical journey across historical, geographical and cultural space to include virtually every possible facet of man's relationship with power, authority and oppression.

Khushwant Singh does not use fiction merely as a tool of revenge against the malefactors of freedom and individuality but his essential greatness as a writer, rests on his originality. His novels are not regional and narrow but embrace the entire race of mankind. Corruption is a universal trait which exists in every culture, transcending social, linguistic and geographical barriers. It characterizes man and reflects the life of a nation. Even though there has always been a less serious attitude towards satire and satirists, a sense of humour has always accompanied this genre. It is this element that provides a powerful aesthetic experience to the reader.

As a sensitive novelist, Khushwant Singh responds to the social problems and issues and his novels reflect his social concern. A touch of humanity is the hallmark of his novels. Listening to the "still, sad music of humanity," he writes his novels to echo his concern for the social problems. He condemns racial and gender discrimination, as well as apathy and indifference of modern society. Man's relationship with society forms an important thread of Khushwant Singh's novels. Khushwant Singh's writings, though essentially journalistic, will certainly stand the test of time. Among Indian English novelists, he is both an insider and outsider. This position has given him an objectivity which is rare among Indian English novelists.

The most noteworthy issue that Khushwant Singh satirizes upon is betrayal. The writer gives more importance to this term because he had learnt a lot by his own experience and had come across many cases. As a businessman Victor is betrayed by his companion Nair. Mattoo betrays his wife in *Burial at Sea*. In *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, Champak betrays Sher Singh, Madan betrays his wife in *Delhi*. Meer Taqi betrays his wife who, in return, is betrayed by Sahiba Begum

and the rulers betray each other. Aurangzeb betrays his father and his brothers, Mahatma Gandhi is betrayed by his own country men and finally Indira Gandhi is betrayed by her own bodyguard, a Sikh. To stop this kind of attitude Singh had brought out realistic incidents and exposed the cunning nature of man. Singh, being a humanist, loves the fun and frolics of life. He thought that his people were peace loving people but he was disillusioned after witnessing the inhumanistic, beastly nature of man during the holocaust of the partition. Train to Pakistan stands the best example to justify this point. The Partition created havoc in the Indian history.

The Muslims killing the Hindus and Sikhs in Pakistan and the Sikhs massacring the Muslims and loading the corpses in trains, is presented in a very realistic and brutalistic manner. Abducting women mercilessly, killing innocent children, looting of the house and wealth, were something which was not expected by many of the Indians. The politicians for their personal benefits and fame brought the idea of Partition. The novel Delhi is replete with incidents exposing the beastly nature of man. Except for Bahadur Shah Zafar, all other Mughal rulers possessed this quality. Emperors like, Nadir Shah, Aurangzeb, Taimurs, etc came to India with personal ambition disguised in the name of religion. These rulers ordered their men to level every home of the Hindus and Sikhs, slay every man, woman and innocent children and set fire to the place. They dug their homes, stripped women naked and exploited the whole country. In the episodes entitled The Builders and The Dispossessed, a terrorist group murdering a Muslim shopkeeper, spoiling the peace in a country and ultimately killing Mahatma, assassinating the feeble Indira Gandhi are all that reveals the beastly nature of man. Even in the novel Burial at Sea, Nair, the friend of Victor stands culprit for the murder of the India's biggest tycoon. Singh strongly condemns these antisocial activities.

Belief in superstition is another fact that Singh mocks at, in all his novels. He attacks especially the Indians on this aspect. Singh is an atheist and a rationalist. Though not strongly, he ridicules the follies of men with regard with superstition. In the very beginning of the novel Train to Pakistan, when the writer goes on to describe the village Mano Majra and its people, he says that there was a three-foot slab of sandstone under a Keekar tree which was the local deity and that the Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims or the pseudo-Christians "repair secretly whenever they are in special need of blessing." (10) Singh not only attacks their beliefs but also their hypocrisy. In I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, Sher Singh and his cronies in the very beginning of the novel talk on 'baptism in blood' in the manner of ancient Hindu religious custom of dipping the swords in the blood of sacrificed goats and laying them before the Goddess - 'Kali' or 'Durga'. In Delhi, a novel on religious bigotry, superstition is found to the maximum. Khwaja Sahib predicting the future and

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blessing everyone, the presence of another dervish who conspires against the king and finally meeting with a fatal end - and as a result of which the occurrence of a heavy sandstorm, famine, confusion and poverty are all presented by the author to unmask the cunning nature and ugly minds of such soothsayers. If ordinary men believe in superstition, it can in a way be accepted, but people like Shah Jahan, Nadir Shah and Aurangzeb who were mighty Mughal rulers too believed in the same. Listening to gossip mongers and soothsayers Shah Jahan refuses to accept Aurangzeb as his heir. The Taimurs, after having a dream about chasing out the birds in a farm, approach a saint to interpret their dream. The saint says that they will be going to a place where the infidels live in large numbers and he (Taimur) would chase them out of the place as they had chased the birds from a farm in the dream. Hence the Taimurs proceed towards Delhi only to exploit the place. In *The Company of Women* also the satire on superstition is found. When Mohan's father takes Mohan with him to the Haridwar and river Ganga he tells about the purity and faith that people had in it. He says that once the water is placed down, it lost its purity and that it is considered to be a Goddess that washed away all the sins committed by man in one dip. Singh attacks men like Mohan's father and counter attack through the words of Mohan who like Singh is a rationalist. Mohan tells his father that it was all superstition by informing him that the pure water was contaminated and polluted by corpse thrown into the water and performing rituals. In *Burial at Sea*, the author speaks about superstitious beliefs and bogus-religion. People who believe in superstition fall an easy prey to men and women who cheat in the name of religion. Victor falls into the charming beauty of Ma Durgeshwari. He gives his hard earned money in the name of charity. Later it is confirmed that the real name of Durgeshwari was Shanti Devi had been with three men who all forsake her before she became a sadhvi. The yoga teacher Swami Dhananjay Brahmachari was Durga Das and was convicted on charges of thieving and burglary.

Another issue that keeps pricking the mind of Khushwant Singh is the initiation of young minds into sex. This aspect is found in all the novels of Singh. He would have personally experienced the same when he had gone to England for his higher studies. Singh very strongly attacks those who initiate the youngsters to sex which has become a common issue in the modern world. In *Train to Pakistan* Hukum Chand, the Magistrate initiates Haseena, into sexual orgies. Madan in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* initiates Beena into sex but fortunately she narrowly escapes when she sees Champak coming out of Madan's room in Simla. In Delhi, the young poet Taqi is taken to the lustful world by Begum Sahiba, the wife of Nawab Rais. Another incident is given by the author when he looks into the newspaper and sees the news that a step mother had raped a young boy when his father was out on tour. In *The Company of Women*, Molly Gomes and Sue too have a flashback on how they were deflowered. Molly was seduced by her mother's

younger brother and Susanthika by her father's younger brother. In return, she seduces his fourteen-year-old son. Here Singh not only satirizes the ones who initiates the young minds to sex but also exposes the lack of morality in contemporary society. In *Burial at Sea*, Victor loses his virginity to a prostitute and his daughter, Bharati is seduced by Nair at the same place where her father lost his virginity.

Khushwant Singh through his novels attacks most of the social evils of society.

In *Train to Pakistan*, the police inspector and Hukum Chand come under this category. The inspector does his duty in all sincerity, but he is sometimes mocked by the magistrate. Hence to get things done the inspector flatters Hukum Chand. All that the inspector and the magistrate wanted was to do anything which would not cause problems. They were not the least bothered about others. This shows the self-centeredness of both. Hukum Chand puts a bold stand outside and seems to be in control, but he is really not. He plays a hypocritic role in the novel. Even Iqbal Singh, the young westernized man who comes to Mano Majra as a political worker, is projected as a hypocrite. All his pretence to work for the society is just humbug. In fact he is more interested in self-development and fame. In *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, Sher Singh plays the same role that Iqbal Singh played in *Train to Pakistan*. Buta Singh, is a typical character to be satirized. He asks his son Sher to talk anything he liked but to be careful in his dealings. Though he was loyal to the Raj, he sometimes talked ill about them in the presence of his fellow Indians. Nair in *Burial at Sea* is to some extent like Buta Singh. In the novel *Delhi*, Mussadi Lai who accepts Hinduism and Islam is focused as a hypocrite who leads a life for others and not for his own self. Even his wife shunned him at times.

Jealousy is yet another aspect of human nature that Khushwant Singh criticizes. He strongly believes that there can be competition among men. In fact it develops the individuality in a man. But jealousy leads to hatred and hatred leads to enmity and ultimately enmity leads to destruction. In *Train to Pakistan*, Mali and his gang are jealous of Jugga which breeds to hatred. They murder Ram Lal for which Jugga becomes the scapegoat. In *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, the closeness between Buta Singh and Taylor, the Deputy Commissioner is envied by Buta Singh's fellow colleagues. In *Delhi*, Meer Taqi is jealous of his substitute teacher who is taken up favourably by Begum Sahiba. In *The Company of Women*, it is just because of the jealousy and possessiveness that the conjugal life between Mohan and Sonu develops a cleavage. Dhanno, the jamadhami, is jealous and possessive and therefore considers Sarojini as her rival. Nair in *Burial at Sea*, is known for his jealousy, flattery and back-biting nature.

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Discrimination is another aspect that Singh strongly condemns in his novels. The discrimination may be either racial or gender based. Though in almost all the novels Singh satirizes women, but it doesn't mean that he is against women. All that he has exposed about women are out of his personal experience and what he had witnessed. He presents facts without any exaggeration. Racial discrimination forms the major theme of his novels. The hatred between the Hindus and Muslims forms the basis of many of his novels. In *Train to Pakistan*, Jugga's mother throws out Nooran from her house only because she was a Muslim. In *Delhi*, the racial discrimination between the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and the British is very obvious. In *The Company of Women*, the cook drops the old chappatis in a vessel that Dhanno had brought with her without touching. Being an Indian and having a strong sense of belongingness, the novelist vehemently and strongly satirizes the exploitation of wealth from India. *Delhi*, exclusively deals with this idea.

Conclusion

Philosophically speaking, God created man and that the ultimate reason for God's creation is happiness. But is every man happy and contented? If so, why is he indulging in unwanted, anti-social activities that seem wrong to others? And if man thinks that the ultimate reason behind God's creation is happiness, what should he do to attain the same? Certainly he should reform himself and be contented. If not, he will face the consequences in some way or the other. It is true that everyone is liable to commit mistakes, but this thought should not be taken for granted. One should always try to rectify one's mistake. If not circumstances can bring about a change. And if the circumstance comes in the form of a man himself, it would be more effective. In the present highly competitive world everyone has become avaricious and materialistic. The word 'sharing' has lost its meaning now. The more they get the more they want. To get more they choose the wrong path that finally would prove disastrous. To bring men to their senses satirists came into the contemporary world. Instead of preaching, arguing and fighting they just mock or laugh at society with a motive to change men. The novelist is conscious of the best things that life offers but he restricts himself to the realistic portrayal of an earthly man who does not want any aesthetic or artistic things in life. This realistic and truthful presentation of the writer on sex and social morals is analysed in a detailed manner and the essence of satire therein is clearly presented. The novelist mainly concentrates on the main subjects like bogus religion, sexuality, man's greed, lust for power and wealth, madness of western culture, and inhumanity. An analytical study of the novels reveals Khushwant Singh's view on each of the above mentioned aspects as well as the type of satire employed by the author. Khushwant Singh as a columnist and social commentator makes a sturdy effort to satirize the predominating social evils that exist in India through his novels.

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