

KHUSWANT SINGH AS A STORY- TELLER OF HIGH CALIBRE

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Abstract

In this paper, I present Khushwant Singh as a short story writer of high calibre. His stories have varied themes. They have Indian setting. Irony, humour and satire have made the stories pleasant and interesting. The author also uses the elements of folklore and supernatural elements in some of his stories. Singh has also created a varied world of persons in his stories. They belong to various strata of society and do various jobs. They are given proper roles. They are in line with the plots of the stories. Hence, Khushwant Singh is a great figure in the world of short story.

Keywords: Anglophile, chapattis, colloquial, folklore, humour, irony, melancholic, portrayal, satire, snobbery, stale and supernatural.

Introduction:

Khuswant Singh (1915-2014) is a well-known Indian novelist, short-story writer, journalist, historian and humourist. Singh breathed his last recently (20th March, 2014) in Delhi when he was 99 years old. Significantly, he wrote one of his famous novels, “The Sunset Club” when he was 95. He was also an outstanding translator of the Sikh religious texts and Urdu poetry.

Khuswant Singh was born on February 2nd, 1915 at Hadali, now in Pakistan. He was educated at Lahore and London University. For some time he was a lecturer at the Law College, Punjab University. Later, he served as Public Relation Officer in the Indian High Commissioner in London. He is a most successful writer of short stories. He takes his place with Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan, Pravar Jhabwala and others who have tried to portray a true picture of India, with his qualities and defects to the West. The stories of these writers presented a faithful and vivid picture of the Indian scene, especially the Post-Independence one. Commenting on the importance of Khuswant Singh, Shiv K. Kumar says “with the publication of ‘The Mark of Vishnu and other stories’ (1950) Khushwant Singh shot into a worldwide reputation”. He has received the Grove Press Award for the best fiction from India. He was honoured with Padma Bhushan in 1974 which he later on returned because of operation Blue Star, which was started by Indira Gandhi. He was awarded with Padma Vibhushan in 2007.

All his short stories were published in “*The Collected Short Stories of Khuswant Singh*” (1989).

Features (Themes) of the Stories:

The stories of Khuswant Singh possess various features. They deal with a wide range of themes which can be discussed as follows:

(a) Comic Element:

Khuswant Singh is essentially a comic writer. He makes use of humour, wit, and satire to create comic scenes. Even his gentle and serious stories are pleasant and interesting. For example, in *Karma*, we laugh at Mohan Lal's pitiable condition caused by his Anglicized snobbery. He felt proud of his English. It is superior to Indian culture in his view. He is an anglophile and is proud of his Oxford background and perfect English accent. He travels in the first class compartment while his wife, a genuine Indian Woman, travels in a ladies compartment in the same train. He feels happy to see two English soldiers coming to his compartment. But they come in and throw out Mohan Lal's luggage on the platform. When Mohan Lal protested it, he too is beaten and thrown out of the compartment. It is a funny incident.

In *Kusum* we smile at the behaviour of the hawker. When Kusum dashed the cart of oranges driven by a young hawker, she scolded him that he was a blind. The naughty hawker closed one eye and said that he was blind but with one eye.

Then, the children's comments of Gunga Ram's superstitious views are comic in *The Mark of Vishnu*. Gunga Ram put the saucer of milk before the snake and bowed his head before him for prayer and forgiveness in putting it in a time. It is also humorous that the teacher falls from his chair when the cobra comes out of the tin.

In *Man, How the government of India Run!*, the writer says that the officials of the Government office do not work but just show that they work hard. Similarly the surprising behaviour of the Insurance Agent in *Insurance Agent* irony in *Voice of God* and the animal love of the author's grandmother in *The Portrait of Lady* etc. are quite comic elements found in these stories.

(b) Satire, Ironic Humour and Wit:

The short stories of Khuswant Singh are essentially satirical. Khuswant Singh, in fact, is widely known for his **jokes and satirical expressions**. For example, in *Man, How the Government of India Runs!*, Khuswant Singh attacks the clerk in a government office. It is mentioned that one gets success only by winning favour of the boss and doing things for him. In the story, Sundar Singh does not work in his office at all but shows that he is very tired. He ironically says that he has to work hard otherwise 'How the Government of India would run'. In *The Voice of God*, he satirizes the faulty election procedure in democratic India. Similarly in *Karma* the snobbery of the Anglicized is satirized. In addition to, in *The Mark of Vishnu*, Khuswant Singh laughs at the superstitions of the Indians.

(C) Indian Scene:

Another characteristic feature of the short stories of Khuswant Singh is that all of them contain Indian Scenes. The settings, situations and characters are mostly Indian. Only sometimes the setting is abroad. There are very few foreigners in the stories. Mostly, the Indian scene and society are shown and even criticised by the writer. For example, *Man, How the government of India Run!*, *Karma*, *Mark of Vishnu*, *The Voice of God*, *Death comes to Daulat Ram*, and *My Own My Native Land* are very Indian in content and style. Various aspects of Indian life are

either depicted or criticised by the writer in these stories. In *My Own My Native Land*, the author praises his mother-land in contrast to the foreign country. The story is patriotic.

(D) Supernatural Element and Folklore:

Khushwant Singh does not confine himself to city life only. In fact, he has said that his “roots are in the dunghill of a tiny Indian village”. For example, *The Mark of Vishnu* deals with **superstitions regarding snakes**. Gunga Ram is an illiterate superstitious Brahmin. He has superstitious view about the Kala Nag. He feeds the cobra with milk-every night. He feeds him and worships him in the school too. But the cobra bites Gunga Ram and he dies. Thus, Gunga Ram dies because of his superstitious views. *Death comes to Daulat Ram* also contains **supernatural atmosphere and happenings**. The sun is fighting with black clouds, the trees were desolated and the house looks old and widowed. The appearance of the ghost of Ranga’s grandfather contributes to the element of the supernatural.

(E) Love and Sex:

One more recurrent theme of Khushwant Singh is **love and sex**. According to Khushwant Singh, love and sex are essential aspects of life. His story, *The Rape and Black Jasmine* deals with **sex**. The other story *Kusum* is coloured with the **element of sex**. Kusum is dark, short and ordinary girl. No man even looks at her. She too knows it and remains secluded and does not use cosmetics. One day she dashes her bicycle against the cart of a hawker. When she argues with him, he makes obscene gestures to her. This kindles the emotions of sex in Kusum and she starts using cosmetics in order to look smart.

(F) Autobiographical Elements:

Khushwant Singh’s stories have autobiographical elements. The common narrator “I” is certainly the author himself. He is often reminiscent of the past. Affection also enters his stories. The best example of the fact is *The Portrait of a Lady*. In this story, the author expresses his memories and affection of his grandmother. He tells us how the grandmother took care of him during his childhood. She had same affection on him till her death. The author remembers how the old lady fed dogs and sparrows with bread or Chapattis. The death of the lady moves the readers.

(G) Serious or Melancholic Note:

The main theme of the short stories of Khushwant Singh is **comedy**. However, some of his stories touch our hearts. They make us serious. For example, *The Mark of Vishnu*, *Death Comes to Daulat Ram* and *The Portrait of Lady* contain **melancholic note**. In the first story, Gangu Ram dies of snakebite, in the second, Ranga’s father dies and in the last the loving grandmother of the author dies.

Thus death makes the stories pathetic and melancholic.

(H) Character-Portrayal:

One of the important features of Khushwant Singh’s stories is his **art of characterization**. Really, Khushwant Singh has painted a *Portrait Gallery* in his short stories. He has created memorable personalities. We get portraits of Mohan Lal, the Anglicized snobbish Indian in the story of *Karma*, Gangu Ram, the superstitious Brahmin in *The Mark of Vishnu*, Kusum, the young girl who realizes sexual feelings in herself in *Kusum*, Daulat Ram, an

old father of the narrator who dies in mysterious atmosphere in *Death Comes to Daulat Ram*, Swami in *The Insurance Agent*, Sundar Singh, the stenographer in *Man, How the Government of India Run!*, the loving and memorable grandmother of the author in *The Portrait of A Lady* and Ganda Singh, Kartar Singh and Baba Ram Singh in *The Voice of God*.

(I) Realism:

It is true that the stories of Khushwant Singh are highly comic and pleasant. But it is also true that they are **realistic**. Most of them are based on the author's experiences. They reflect the Indian life scene except the supernatural spirits and atmosphere; everything can be experienced in real life.

Conclusion:

Thus the stories of Khushwant Singh have varied features/ themes. Such a variety of stories is seldom found. This makes the stories memorable. In addition, they all together share one authentic quality and it is Indian setting and life scene. That is why; Khushwant Singh is often called the writer of merit and an artist of Calibre.

Critique:

The study of Khushwant Singh stories reveals the fact that Khushwant Singh is a superb craftsman. The style of the author is original, lucid, simple and varied. The way of presenting the story is artistic. The beginnings of the stories are abrupt and dramatic. The author comes to the main point after a while. Thus the beginnings become interesting. In the stories there are many pieces of conversation. The language is simple and sometimes very 'Indian' or 'colloquial' as well. Characters are rightly chosen and rightly placed. The endings are really suitable and worthy to be praised. They, perhaps, contain the essence and main interest of the stories. Some stories are suggestive and symbolic too. The use of spices of humour, irony and satire illuminate the stories.

References;

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