



## **WIT, HUMOUR AND LAUGHTER IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S SHORT STORIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this paper the focus is on the witty and humorous elements in the short stories of Khushwant Singh. As a realist and an honest writer Singh writes about a number of aspects of Indian life through which he ridicules, humourously satirizes and ironically lampoons the pretensions, weaknesses or the faults of his countrymen and their habits. Commenting on the realism in his short stories Khushwant Singh says in his essay, "Compulsions to Write":*

*My first collection of short stories *The Mark of Vishnu* (Saturn Press, London) was largely the product of my briefless days as a lawyer in Lahore. Almost all of them were based on real experiences or those related by friends. I took minimum liberties with the facts and this only to give them some punch.<sup>i</sup>*

Khushwant Singh's strengths are reality pinged with wit and humor and comic spirit through which he makes his readers burst into laughter. Writing about the above qualities of Khushwant Singh, Shyam Asnani says:

*The comic spirit, exploration of the world around and presenting it in all its nakedness and the truth and capacity to capture reality in all its magnificence and horror, the felicity of expression, stark originality, unique lightness of touch mingled with a touch of fantasy are precisely the qualities that are distinctly his own. He chooses only those areas and aspects of life, which he knows best and successfully presents them with sardonic wit, lively spirit, gentle jocularly and pricking prank.<sup>ii</sup>*

"Mr Singh and the Colour Bar" is an interesting story, which blends both wit and humour. Mr. Singh, the narrator, is the protagonist in this story. He criticizes the Indians for their peculiar attitudes when they go abroad. Just as Khushwant Singh satirizes the different aspects of life in India, in this story, he satirizes the peculiar attitudes Indians bear towards

the British ways of life. Singh seems to scorn the natives for their pitiable and ridiculous efforts at imitating the western ways of life and manners. For example, the table manners of the Indians, improper use of lavatories and tubs in the bathrooms come in for particular wit and satire. Khushwant Singh laughs at the Indians who go abroad and misbehave and are ill mannered. He also comments on the sexually repressed Indians' tendency to ogle at English women;

*“Our boys come here and look at women as a hungry dogs look at food.”  
 (“Mr Singh and the Colour Bar,” p.176) <sup>iii</sup>*

In another satirical story, “My Own My Native Land,” Singh depicts the hurdles that the narrator encounters at the Bombay harbor. The narrator while trying to avail Customs exemption for his transfer of residence on his arrival from Europe, faces several problems brought up by the customs officials and clerks. The incident narrated here is both satirical and humorous and portrays the flaws of the customs department and the people who run it. Khushwant Singh authentically portrays the slothful attitude of the clerks and other officers in the customs office. After reaching Bombay harbor the narrator does not know which queue he should join in order to take his exemption for transfer of residence. So he joins a queue marked ‘Inquires’. At the Inquiry desk one of the lady clerks tells him to go and check, “the number on the board above the customs officer.” (“My Own My Native Land,” p.206) Though he moves around the hall he fails to find the number on the board. So after the narrator discovers that blunder the lady clerk takes a piece of chalk to inscribe the numbers on the boards. As a result “several queues had a quick game of ducks and drakes.” (p.206) The narrator has to join the queues several times and has to spend three hours because of the inefficiency and negligence of the clerks and the officers to take his exemption for transfer of residence. Singh also portrays the corruption of officials. After all the exercises described above, the narrator has to show himself up for customs inspection. But one middle-aged man asks the narrator to pay ten rupees to rescue himself from the customs inspection. As the old man says, “What phor you bother so much. Give me ten rupees and it will be hokey.” (“My Own My Native Land,” p.208) Thus, all these incidents show the inefficiency, negligence and the slothfulness of the clerks at the harbor and the trouble that people are put to, standing in the queues for several hours.

“The Bottom Pincher,” is another story that is laced with satire and humour. The narrator, the ‘I’ in the story is a man who likes to pinch and caress the bottoms of young women. But his respectable position in the society deters him from doing such things. He is forced to enjoy himself merely by looking or staring at women’s bottoms. One day the narrator encounters a rich person named Pesi Lalkaka Sahib who comes in a nice car to a temple. He gives coins to the beggars with his right hand and caresses the bottoms of women with his left hand.

By portraying such characters Khushwant Singh seems to suggest that Indian society is not only filled with clerks and customs officers (who show negligence and slothfulness in their

work), but also with people like Pesi Lalkaka who find pervert pleasure and enjoyment in pinching and brushing the bottoms of women.

Khushwant Singh also seems to suggest that many rich people like Lalkaka, hide their sinful deeds in the shadow of money and wealth. The narrator unnoticed by Pesi Lalkaka dares for the first time to pinch and brush against the bottom of a young girl, which leads to his arrest. However because of Lalkaka he is released from jail. As a whole, the result of the story is sheer fun and laughter.

In the short story, “The Mulberry Tree,” the protagonist, Vijay Lal a man in his fifties is a rational individual, and an atheist in his beliefs. Through the character of Vijay, Singh expresses his serious anger at the superstitious beliefs and ignorance of a number of idol worshippers in India. Many middle class men and women both educated and illiterate stand in a queue in order to offer their milk to the idol of Ganapati, which is assumed to drink milk. One young man in saffron clothes delivers a monologue on the Indian gods like Krishna and Hanuman and their miracles. Another man says that it is because of these gods that India is still a glorious country whereas other countries like Greece, Egypt and Rome are wiped from the face of the Earth. To this Singh through his protagonist humorously satirizes the blind faith of a number of Indians. “Greece, Egypt and Rome continue to flourish as they ever did in the past; only India remains buried under the debris of ignorance and superstition. Stone and metal imbibing milk is the latest example of our continuing backwardness. (“The Mulberry Tree,” pp.166-167)

In a similar manner, the story, “The Red Tie” is filled with satire and irony and creates both laughter and pity in the reader. Chishti, the important character in this story, is a man who is shy and bashful and not very confident of himself but always tries to pose that he is a man certain of his own powers. Chishti boasts about his conquests of women as is revealed when he narrates his tale of his acquiring “The Red Tie,” from a woman – a total stranger – at a railway station:

*I must tell you about rather a good one that I pulled off on my last tour. Absolutely unbelievable. Had a woman in the railway train at a junction station while she was waiting for her connection. She gave me this tie, too. Chishti held aloft his somewhat smudged red tie. ‘Probably her husband’s. Wonder what story she went and told him. Ha Ha!’ (“The Red Tie.” p.203)*

He also cracks jokes to make himself the center of attraction in a crowd. One of his favourite jokes was on marriage, “Marriage is like chewing gum, sweet in the beginning and sticky in the end. Ha Ha!” (p. 202)

*Men were extremely jealous of him and women just loved to hear him narrate his tales:*

*Stories of his miraculous seductive powers abounded in social circle and were enviously narrated by men and hungrily listened to by women. How he had just held a woman's hand under the dinner table and started an affair; how he had enticed rich men's wives, bureaucrats' wives, clerks' wives, old women, young women, college girls and even school girls. ("The Red Tie," p.203)*

The satire of the story, however, becomes clear as soon as we realize that Chishti can only 'prove' himself and his manliness by narrating imaginary sexual exploits. The woman Chishti meets in his travel by train actually steals all his belongings and spits on his tie to show her disgust for him. "His coat and attache case were gone. His red tie still hung on the peg but saliva trickled down its broad end on to the floor." ("The Red Tie," p 205) The only thing that the woman did not steal from Chishti is the red tie, which she left behind as a memento of her dislike for him. However, Chishti lies about it and relates that the red tie is a gift he received as a token of love.

Thus the sting in all the above amusing stories leads to absolute fun and laughter. Singh uses the technique to humorously ridicule and satirize the follies of men, the airs that they put on to mislead themselves and others and the empty pretentiousness of their lives. All in all, the curlicue in Khushwant Singh's stories is put to effective use and distinguishes his work from other writers working in the field.

## REFERENCE

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<sup>i</sup> Khushwant Singh, "Compulsions to Write." *Khushwant Singh The Man and the Writer* Ed.

R.K.Dhawan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001, p. 24.

<sup>ii</sup> Shyam M. Asnani: "A study of Train to Pakistan" appearing in *Rajasthan Journal of English Studies*, Vol.2, Jan.1976, p.9.

<sup>iii</sup> Kushwant Singh. *The Collected Short Stories* New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1989. All quotes are from this edition, with titles of the stories cited either in the text or in parenthesis along with the page numbers.