



## **KHUSHWANT SINGH'S SATIRICAL GOALS AS DIRECTED TOWARDS THE ATROCITIES OF THE SOCIAL MILIEU PICTURED IN HIS FICTIONAL WORLD: AN ANALYSIS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper attempts to project Khushwant Singh not only as a writer of history and fiction but also as a cultured humanist using 'satire and comedy' as a social corrective, thereby making fiction as an affirmative, positive and vital aspect of his comic vision and shows how Singh, cherishing great value for Indian art and culture, has made his literary creation spontaneously grow out of the grass roots of the social milieu as his experience of rural India is the base of his creative endeavour. It neatly analyses how far Khushwant Singh's satirical goals are directed towards the atrocities of the social milieu picturized in his fictional world.*

**Key Words:** cultured humanist, comic vision, literary scenario, creative endeavour humorist, satirical goal, Sardonic wit.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Khushwant Singh is one of the most distinguished men of letters with an international reputation, occupying a significant place in the current literary Scenario and as a notable novelist, he is famous for *Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Having described himself as a writer of history and fiction, he proved himself to be a cultured humanist using 'satire and comedy' as a social corrective, thereby making fiction as an affirmative, positive and vital aspect of his comic vision. Cherishing great value for Indian art

**DR. S. CHELLIAH**

1P a g e



and culture and being deeply rooted in the Indian soil, he has made his writing spontaneously grow out of the grass roots of the social milieu as his experience of rural India is the base of his creative endeavour. He is two in one a humorist and a novelist. There is plenty of sardonic wit and knowledge of people and their circumstances but no nonsense anywhere. As a satirist, he has succeeded in comprehending and expressing the incongruities and complexities of life. As a literary artist, Khushwant Singh has chosen the Indian political scenario of 1942 and 1947 for his novels *Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* so as to establish his artistic excellence. The Sikh vivacity is very much alive in him and his novels not merely reveal the Indian milieu but outspokenly they bring out different facets of the author's sikh ethos. In spite of his being usually associated with humour, a sad overtone of a thirst for identity is the strand of his art and his ability to satirise the individuals and generalize through them deserved appreciation and critical evaluation. Generally speaking, literature expresses thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards life. To stand the test of time, a good work of art should 'hold the mirror upto nature' and it should be original. In the event of a writer being able to evoke his concerns with feelings and thoughts which humanity recognizes as belonging to real life, then, he passes the test of 'holding the mirror upto nature'. Khushwant Singh brings before one's attention the destruction of human values in a larger level in *Train to Pakistan* and in a microcosmic level in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. He is a writer trying his level best to evoke the feeling of compassion and pathos through realistic portrayal of men and events.

Good literature lays focus on subtly, sensibility and the human factor at the bottom of all things. Khushwant Singh's novels deal with the human values of purity, brotherhood, friendship, love and sacrifice along with the human foibles of revenge, selfishness, jealousy and retaliation. The political tone in both the novels gets suppressed by the ethical and satirical tone overrunning it. Truly speaking, the novel will live as long as human life does, making the readers pursue thinking by the statement of life it makes between its lines, for the novel serves as a powerful medium influencing society and thereby the readers. The words of Wilbur Scott are apt quoting here:

*"The relations between literature and society are reciprocal. Literature is not only the effort of social causes, it is also the cause of social effects"* (P 126).

Khushwant Singh is a staunch critic of various walks of society in his own satirical ways. As Gilbert Highet has put it,

*"Any author, who often and powerfully uses a number of the typical weapons of satire, irony, paradox, topicality, obscenity, violence is likely to be writing*



*satire. If he uses these devices only in certain sections alone may properly be satirical” (The Anatomy of Satire 18).*

In the realm of art or literature, a real satirist differs from the layman who is critical rather than satirical. A satirist expresses his feeling with wit and genius in a novel, poem or play. He may either be a moralist or preacher. Satire is nothing but a powerful literary weapon used by a literary artist to bring out the adversities of society and fight against them. The negative traits or forces in the society are captured only by a satirist. In a word, satire aims at higher morality and social stability. The best way of attacking wickedness and foolishness is by laughing at them which Khushwant Singh does very well. In his short story ‘Karma’, he mocks at an Indian who fails miserably in his attempt to imitate the Britishers. ‘The Mark of Vishnu’ is another short story which parodies the typical superstitions belief prevalent in our country. While Chaucer used mild satire in his *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, he neither detested nor loved them but unmasked their pretensions and weaknesses. Charles Dickens used his satirical vein to attack and criticise the injustices of his time. Khushwant Singh’s novels reveal the social scrambles in a politically muddled world with empathy and a satirical tone.

As a brilliant novelist, story writer, historian and distinguished journalist, his achievements are far-reaching. He is noted for his two novels *Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. *Train to Pakistan* is one of the finest realist novels of Post-war II of Indian English fiction. It was originally entitled ‘Mano Majra’. Mano Majra is the name of a place which is the centre of action in the sequence of events leading to the final catastrophe. Mano Majra, the name of a village, is a fixed point in space whereas the train is a symbol of movement. The ‘train’ also denotes groups of people heading for different destinations on the eve of the partition of the Indian sub-continent, millions of people from either side of the dividing boundary were on the way, seeking refuge and security. Millions of non-Muslims from Pakistan longed for a passage to India, a land of hope and peace. Millions of Muslims from India sought the road to Pakistan, the land of Islamic faith and promise. Thus, the train signifies the movement of vast communities torn from their roots. Cynicism is mixed with pity when Khushwant Singh describes the fate of a family caught in the whirlwind of partition tumults. When the evacuation of the Muslims is in progress, the fate of a Sikh family is described:

*“Sunder Singh’s children cried for water and food... Sundar Singh gave them his urine to drink. The that dried upto. So he pulled out his revolver and shot them all” (TTP 155).*



Khushwant Singh's abilities cannot be equally rated with the satirical potentialities of Dickens, Chaucer or Swift. But the social commitment of Dickens, the chancier disposition of satire through characterization and the ironical contemplation of Swift is ever alive in Khushwant Singh. His novels are not plain satires. His soft corner for the Sikhs makes him scrutinize the community with perspicacity. The result is a refutation of their foibles, a critical insight on their behavior and thereby a total satirical vision of society in general. In his overzealousness to debunk Indian pompousness, Khushwant Singh caricatures Indian characters. Even if his axe falls on individuals, the brunt of his satire is the Indian milieu.

The duplicity of a character in public and private lives and the irony which the novelist sees in their behavior marks one's attention. Roger Fowler defines irony as an art used for "the expression of incongruities" which is also "able to assert the world's diversity" (P 102). Khushwant Singh's ironical figures exemplify what Fowler has defined. Iqbal in *Train to Pakistan* at Mano Majra as a social worker. The novelist hints at his character in the beginning of the novel itself through Meet Singh, the priest. Iqbal talks as if he has arrived as a redeemer of the society. His first meeting with Meet Singh confirms it:

*"Someone must do something to stop it (the bloodshed) my party has sent me here, since this place is a vital point for refugee movements" (P 32).*

But as the events progress, he is incapable of facing reality and is unable to solve the problems vehemently. He is upset on hearing the murder of Ram Lal. This unexpected reaction bewilders Meet Singh and he surprisingly says, "Why Babu Sahib, you have come to stop killing and you are upset by one murder" (P 34).

Iqbal in spite of being attracted towards socialist thinking, is primarily concerned with personal leadership. His idealistic speeches prove to be mere waste of words. He gives a long lecture about freedom:

*"If you want freedom... you have to get together and fight. Get the banian congress Government out. Get rid of the princes and landlords and freedom will mean for you just what you think it should. More land, more buffaloes, no debts" (P 43).*

But there is not a single incident which proves his idealism. He is an ordinary middle class man talking about rural indebtedness, the average national income and capital exploitation. Iqbal's early romantic notions about progress and revolution, which are the products of his bookish acquaintance with Marxism, slowly give way to a mellower vision at the end. He is caught in a serious dilemma about the future of the country and about his own role. He is not



able to take any positive action because he is filled with chaos within. He is almost a pretending politician. Khushwant Satirises in order to create an awareness in the minds of the readers about the ostentations in the society. Iqbal dreams of jail as though it were a better place to live in. according to him, jail life seemed to be an object of happiness and romance. He dreams of that world as a step towards progress power and popularity. His concern with self shows his anxiety for assuming the role as a leader. Khushwant Singh sneers at him as a person who lacks the qualifications of a leader as he “had neither fasted nor visited jail. He had not made the necessary sacrifices” (P 45). Iqbal is personified as a helpless, non-committed individual. He himself rationalizes his non-action: “It was time for a declaration of something only he was not sure what it should be” (P 130). If action is an affirmation of life, Iqbal does not live his existence. The numbness which is a feature of Iqbal is a satire on the failure of Western education. He claims himself to be a political worker and commands respect. His urban, sophisticated accent, fastidious style and his experiences of European societies in his talks print the stamp of Western Culture and education in the minds of the villagers. He is seen reading books often. His conversations with Meet Singh engrave a feeling that he is well-versed:

*“India is constipated with a lot of humbug. Take religion. For the Hindu, it means little besides caste and cow-protection. For the Muslim circumcision and Koshermeat. For the Sikh, long hair and hatred of the Muslim...” (P171).*

Strangely enough, it is interesting to note that Iqbal’s view is totally the opposite of Rama in Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* for whom India is metaphysics and nothing else. Iqbal’s bubbling energy in speech does not materialize in the end. The redundant temperament of inaction and obsession for name and fame is renewed in Sher Singh in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* Sher Singh lacks the strength and stamina of a Punjabi youth. Similar to Iqbal’s torpor is Sher Singh’s unpertrified manners. He thinks of “his own inactivity”. He too was “doing nothing except lie on the sofa and get worked up” (ISNHTN 151). THE AUTHOR GIVES A NEGATIVE IMAGE OF Sikh ethos in him – a jackal trying to play the lion. He undertakes militancy as a revolt against the British rule and “militancy for him is a psychological defence –mechanism to hide his physical inadequacy” (P 159). Khushwant Singh does not endow him with fearlessness and endurance. Sher Singh simply muddles through two worlds, the one of a secured life provided by his father and the other “full of applause that would come to him as the heroic leader of a land of terrorists” (ISNHTN 15). Sher Singh is a total wreck even as a husband for he does not react even after hearing his wife champak’s oratory on the servant’s misbehavior. In order to hide his own physical defects, he behaves as if he does not understand the gravity of the situation. He acts as if his aims are towards a promising political career rather than as a lover and husband. Sher Singh, who is involved in the baptism of blood, is never a true nationalist. In prison, he



suffers a lot but does not think that it is for his country. He is very much horrified by his experiences in the prison. But he hides it from the public. He stands as a total contrast to Sriram in R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, both rebellious traits, none of which is found in Sher Singh.

Khushwant Singh is satirical of those who misuse religion. Iqbal once again comes into focus for he does violate the sanctity of the gurdwara. Religion is a master of mere convenience for him. He abhors the external trappings of Sikhism as irksome, yet he prefers them for self-preservation. Iqbal finds that he could be saved only if he is identified as a Sikh. When violence is on the move, he realizes that it was the company of Jugga and the constable who were all Sikhs that really could rescue him from being stopped and questioned. Iqbal, unlike, Niranjana in Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* takes religion for granted. Niranjana is a strict Sikh and he is ready to lay down his life when it comes to the question of violating Sikh codes. For Iqbal, life is more important than religion. As a continuous observer of Indian politics and religious, Khushwant Singh depicts the baneful climate when India was separated as Hindustan and Pakistan. The results of the religious division were deadly. Religious riots spread from Calcutta to Naokhali in East Bengal where Muslims massacred Hindus; to Bihar where Hindus butchered Muslims. It fired a misconception in the minds of Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus. *Train to Pakistan* is an actual rendering of the revelation by the Sikhs in Punjab. When calamities begin to emerge, the religious rhapsodists want to send a train load of Muslim refugees as a 'Gift to Pakistan' to show their umbrage. The author in a helpless mood summarises the wild psyche of the Sikhs: "Logic was never a strong point with Sikhs; when they were roused, logic did not matter at all" (TTP 106). By criticizing rather satirically his own community, he proves to be an iconoclast.

Khushwant Singh talks about the hard heartedness of the Sikhs, who are bent on being vehement. It becomes evident through the sub-inspector's words: "The Sikhs are not doing their share. They have lost their manliness. They just talk big" (P18). The Sikh leader desperately yearns for blood-shed as if it were a means to salvation:

*"What sorts of Sikhs are you (villagers)?... for each Sikh they kill, kill two Mussulmans... for each trainload of dead they send over, send two across... It will teach them that we can also play this game of killing and looting" (P129).*

The brutality is completely analysed and expressed by Meet Singh: "They will kill. If it is a success, they will come to the gurudwara for thanks giving. They will also make offerings to wash away their sins" (146). Sher Singh in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* seeks religion – Sikhism as a shelter for his vices. He finds solace in the Guru's words for his pricking



conscience. Sher Singh kills a crane, by force. Instead of rectifying his misdeed, he wants to get his action justified. He listens to his mother's recital of *The Granth*:

*"... as a rope mistaken for a serpent causeth Panic  
such are delusion and fear" (ISNHTN 21).*

These lines create a reassuring effect. this attitude of finding pacification in a wrong way, in the name of religion makes him hard that he does not feel guilty after killing Jimma Singh, the police informer. Religion becomes an easy trend to satisfy one's wild needs. It is confirmed by Peer Sahib, a divine Muslim in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. He is a fraud wearing the mask of religion. He seduces Shunno and makes her a prey for his sexual hunt. A man given to celibacy but making love to a middle-aged Hindu widow equally committed to religious life is an example of Singh's irony. Irony is further aggravated by the fact that the sin is committed in the temple. The cynicism is explained:

*"In moments of infatuation and physical passion, neither God commands reverence, and unholy alliances are contracted and formed in the temple of the omnipresent God" (Khushwant Singh 118).*

Khushwant Singh's Sahib is a different kind of satirical vision among Indo-Anglian novels. Sexual harassment is a marked satire dealt by Khushwant Singh. The affair between Shunno, the servant maid and peer Sahib is presented as a counterpart to the illicit relationship between Madan and Champak. Madan and Champak belong to the upper stratum of society. They commit adultery in the name of brother-sister relationship. Champak is a sharp contrast to the moral values and religiosity embodied by Sabhrai. The foil in characterization is perhaps to present a physical counterpart to the politically unstable, violent, restless and aggressive world.

Matan is a forthright dandy who seduces Champak and also her sister-in-law Beena. He is the lusty youth who exploits the moral paralysis of woman. Champak, in the absence of her husband, flips away in character. She is ignorant of what Sabhrai reads from The Granth:

*"Forbidden fruit is sweet but  
for a few days  
It entices and ensnares  
Then leaves one sorrowing" (ISNHTN 106).*

Madan plays a double game. To Beena, he says, "Come to my room when everyone is asleep" (110) and from Champak too he forces out a promise that she would visit him. Under



similar situation in Samuel Beckett's play, the man realizes that the outcome of adultery means suffering and pain in this life and hereafter. But Madan Lal is insensitive and lacks self-realization. The private lives of individuals are not the only object of satire by the author. The bureaucrats who are more indulged in their personal benefits also come under his scrutiny. It is Buta Singh in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* and Hukum Chand in *Train to Pakistan* Buta Singh plays the politics of opportunism while Hukum Chand in *Train to Pakistan* stands out as a counterpart of Buta Singh. Thus, Kushwant Singh's satirical goals are directed towards the atrocities of the social milieu. He catches a glimpse of all that is happening around him and never withdraws from bringing it out.

To conclude, Khushwant Singh's novels make the readers aware of the political as well as personal errors or vices. The inhuman mistakes of various personalities from all walks of life have been unraveled by Khushwant Singh with social commitment, adopting the technique of fictionalizing the catastrophes through vivid symbols and authorial satirical comments.

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