



SUPERSTITIONS AND IGNORANCE IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

*Khushwant Singh is a significant Indian English short story writer in the contemporary World. He is a versatile genius with various achievements as an excellent historian, outstanding novelist, straight forward political commentator, lively translator a fantastic observer and a social critic. Singh a short story writer par excellence is arguably one of the most eminent authors occupying a distinguished position in the history of Indo-Anglian literature. He appeared on the literary scene of India with the publication of his short story collection, *The Mark of Vishnu and other stories* 1951. He became popular with his first novel, *Train to Pakistan*, which got him name and fame. The present paper highlights the superstitions and ignorance in the Indian society in the short stories, 'The Mark of Vishnu,' and 'The Mulberry Tree.' It also highlights the superstitions of the people in the novels, *Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*.*

INTRODUCTION

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novel, *Train to Pakistan*, which got him name and fame. The present paper highlights the superstitions and ignorance in the Indian society in the short stories, 'The Mark of Vishnu,' and 'The Mulberry Tree.' It also highlights the superstitions of the people in the novels, *Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*.

In the famous short story, 'The Mark of Vishnu,' Singh highlights the ignorance and the superstitions of the people. Talking about this attribute of Singh, Malashri Lal and Vijay K. Sharma say that "...In many of his short stories, Singh exposes the so called religious and superstitious beliefs, expressing disillusionment about man's rationality." (Singh the Man and the Writer p.26) Khuswant Singh also confesses in one of his interviews that he writes about the superstitions and ignorance of people. "I continue to write stories that are anti-belief and that mock superstition. I have a story called "Agnostic" and my much anthologized story, The Mark of Vishnu is rather well known since it appeared in a number of school textbooks." (Singh the Man and the Writer p.27)

The short story, 'The Mark of Vishnu' is the best example of ignorance and superstitions in the Indian society. It is a beautiful and fantastic story that depicts the gap between religiosity, superstition rationality and skepticism. The protagonist of the story, Gunga Ram is a devout worshipper of Lord Vishnu, the preserver of this world. The other two being Brahma, the creator of the world and Lord Siva the destroyer of the world: "He like all good Hindus, believed in the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva the creator, preserver and destroyer. Of these he was most devout to Vishnu. Every morning he smeared his forehead with V mark in sandalwood paste to honour the deity. (The Mark of Vishnu p 13)

Gunga Ram is depicted as an innocent, ignorant, illiterate and superstitious character. Like all the other Hindus, he believes in the sacredness and sanctity of life. He finds contentment and satisfaction in feeding and protecting the snakes as the snakes are the most poisonous of God's creatures on this Earth. According to the Indian Sacred *Puranas* and in *Bhagavadgita* Lord Vishnu rests on the coils of the Serpent, *adiseshha* or *ananta*. For the believers, *Kala Nag* the King Cobra, is a symbol of Adishesha. As a token of reverence, Gunga Ram keeps a saucer full of milk everyday outside the snake hole. The superstition and ignorance can be seen at the end of the story when the narrator and his brothers take the Kala Nag to the school, the teacher tries to untie the cord of the box, and the snake escapes and proceeds towards the door. At that moment Gunga Ram arrives at the threshold of the classroom: " Outside the classroom stood Gunga ram with a saucer and a jug of milk. As soon as he saw Kala Nag come up he went down on his knees. He poured milk into the saucer and placed it near the threshold. With hands folded in prayer he bowed his head to the ground craving for forgiveness. In desperate fury, the cobra hissed and spat and bit Gunga Ram all over the head." (The Mark of Vishnu p 16) Gunga Ram is bitten by the cobra and the ultimate curlicue can be seen in the last sentence of the story: "On his forehead were little drops of blood.



These the teacher wiped with his handkerchief. Underneath was the V mark where Kala Nag had dug his fangs.” (The Mark of Vishnu p 16)

Through the portrayal of these kind of characters the reader can see the how Khushwant Singh presents the fundamentalists, superstitious and ignorant people who blindly believe in religion without any rational thoughts. Here Singh seems to be in line with Nissim Ezekiel who in his poem, ‘Night of The Scorpion’, portrays and exposes the superstitions of people (villagers) who curse the mother for the sins of her previous birth or for her Karma instead of saving the mother’s life.

In the same story Singh also laughs at the ignorance and innocence of the people through the character of Gunga Ram. For instance when Gunga Ram threatens and admonishes the narrator and his brothers by saying that if they kill the Kala Nag, the hundred eggs laid by it would become hundred kalanags and their house would be full of snakes. During the course of talk when Gunga Ram says that; It is a phannyar- it is hooded,” Khushwant Singh uses the narrator and his brothers as his mouthpiece to laugh at the ignorance of the people in the following words: “ That just proves what a liar you are. The phannyar is the male, so it could not have laid the hundred eggs. You must have laid the eggs yourself. The party bursts into peals laughter. Must be Gunga Ram’s eggs. We’ll soon have hundred Gunga Rams.” (The Mark of Vishnu p 15) Thus, through the character of Gunga Ram in particular and umpteen people like him who threaten narrator and his brothers by saying; You will pay for it one day. You will. fall into their own trap because of their blind faith, superstitions, and ignorance.

‘The Mulberry Tree,’ is another important short story by Khuswant Singh. Vijaya Lal a man in his fifties is the protagonist of the story. He is portrayed as 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 milk to The Kala Nag (Kobra) which is assumed to drink milk. Even people offer milk to the statues of Lord *Ganpathi*. One man in saffron clothes delivers a monologue on the Indian gods like *Krishna*, *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 washed away from the face of the earth. To this Singh through the character of the protagonist, Vijay laughs at the ignorance and the superstitions 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 superstitions. Stone and metal imbibing milk is the latest example of our continuing backwardness. (The Mulberry Tree p 166-167)



In the novel *Train to Pakistan* there are two important characters who are contrasted with one another. The first character is Meet Singh who is the priest of the Sikh temple at ManoMajra and the other is a Muslim Mullah at the mosque of the village ManoMajra. Meet Singh is portrayed as a work shirker who is not interested in work and becomes a priest in the temple. He is a peasant who takes to religion as an escape from work. He is like the railway guide Raju in R.K. Naraynas' novel, *The Guide* who becomes a fake swamy to live a comfortable and happy life without doing any work. Meet Singh becomes a religious priest to meet the common needs and pleasures of this world. He gets up in morning only after the Muslim Mullah: "The priest at the Sikh temple lies in bed till the Mullah has called. Then he too gets up, draws a bucket of water from the well in the temple courtyard, pours it over himself and intones his prayer in monotonous singsong to the splashing of the water". (*Train to Pakistan p 190*)

Meet Singh is neither good at the scriptures nor has he any faculty for conversation. Through these kinds of characters Khushwant Singh makes an attack on the hypocrisy and superstitions of the religious leaders. The hypocrisy and selfishness of Meet Singh can be seen When he says the following to Iqbal: "I have done all I could. My duty is to tell people what is right and what is not. If they insist on doing evil, I ask God to forgive them. I can only pray; the rest is for the police and the Magistrates." (*Train to Pakistan p 193*)

Khuswant Singh presents a foil to the character of Meet Singh through a Muslim Mullah, Imam Baksh who is noble in his attitude and righteous in his life and manners. He is a mine of anecdotes and religious sermons and he teaches and preaches the village students the message of *The Koran*. All people listen to his sermons and anecdotes with devotion and piety which shows the respect he has earned for himself among the masses. With love and affection the villagers (both Hindus and Muslims) call him chacha or uncle.

In the novel, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, Khushwant Singh presents a character by a name Peer Sahib, who is a Muslim Mullah, who offers prayers to the almighty Allah. He is thirty year old and handsome young man with a sweet voice. Shunno is a widow and a maid servant in the house of the religious Sabhrai, the central character in the novel. As a traditional and conventional or ignorant and superstitious woman she does not believe in the eastern or western medicines and goes to the Peer Sahib to get a cure for her disease. When there is a temptation in the form of Shunnoo, PeerSahib fails to control his emotions and meets his desire. Here again the attitude of religious people is visible through the character of Peersahib who uses superstitions and ignorance of the people to enjoy the wealth and sexual enjoyment. Peer Sahib is portrayed as a contrast to the character of Imama Baksh in the novel, *Train to Pakistan*. Through the religious characters Singh seems to make fun of or attack the preachers of different religions who hide their desire, lechery and hypocrisy under the guise of Superstition and ignorance. The notorious thing about Peer Sahib is that he addresses



Shunoo as daughter and makes love to her. The above character makes use of the innocence, ignorance and the superstitions of the people to relish the pleasures of this world.

Thus, through the depiction of the above characters like Gunga Ram, Vijaya Lal, Meet Singh, Imam Baksh, Peer Sahib and other characters Singh seems to laugh and at the same time sympathises with the attitude of the so called religious, fundamentalist superstitious, and ignorant people. What comes out strikingly is Khushwant Singh's understanding and observation of human life in India. Behind all the laughter there is a twinge of sincere pain and concern for the human beings in the short stories and novels of Khushwant Singh.

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