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Khushwant Singh as an Adept in Picturizing both the Positive and Negative Images of Sikhism in his Fiction: A Brief Note

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt not only to project Khushwant Singh as one of the most distinguished writers in the field of contemporary Indian English fiction but also to show him as an adept in picturizing both the positive and negative images of Sikhism rather effectively in his fictional world, bringing home the point that as a brilliant novelist, story writer, historian and distinguished journalist, his literary achievements are far-ranging through publication of his two novels namely *A Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* as the finest realistic novels of Post-War-II of English fiction. It beautifully analyses Khushwant Singh's literary and fictional art which gets deep rooted in the Punjabi soil and Sikh religion and his genuine passion and concern for his community and his healthy attachment to Sikhism in his fictional world.

Keywords- *Sikhism, Literary Art, Fictional World, Realistic Novel*

Introduction

Khushwant Singh is one of the most significant authors in the field of Contemporary Indian–English Fiction. As a brilliant novelist, story writer, historian and distinguished journalist, his literary achievements are far-ranging. He is famous for his two novels – *A Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. *Train to Pakistan* is considered one of the finest realistic novels of post-war II of Indian English Fiction. Even though Khushwant Singh's literary and fictional art gets deep rooted in the Punjabi soil and Sikh religion, he has genuine passion for his community. Despite his claim as an agnostic, his claims to be an agnostic seem to vanish with the significance he does attach to Sikhism in his fictional world. Religion is not only for spiritual purposes but it also helps to improve art. In Khushwant

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Singh's fictional Cosmos, Sikhism plays a major role. The embodiment of Sikh elements – religious, historical, and social – gets exorted with a background survey of the Sikh community from its birth.

An artist who is a responsible individual creates a literary piece that has inter-connections with a number of social, political and economic as well as personal factors. Unlike science which is universal, literature is personal. An author's thoughts, feelings and aspirations are embodied in "a language which is as multi-form as this inward mental action itself and analogous to it, the faithful expression of his intense personality" (Newman III). In the words of Carl Gustav Jung, "art should rise far above the realm of personal life... The Personal aspect is a limitation – and even a sin – in the realm of art" (P185). Mr. Singh is an Indian English novelist who uses the psychological tenor of deviation towards the Sikhs without the hindrance of the personal spirit.

Khushwant Singh was born in 1915 at Hadali in West Punjab, now in Pakistan. He was a leading newspaper columnist and author of nearly 110 books. Educated at Government college, Lahore and King's college, London, he has been a lawyer, Public Relations Officer, Ministry of External Affairs and the most successful Editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. He has been a nominated member of Rajya Sabha. Recipient of several national and international honours, he is the author of the two-volume History of the Sikhs and the widely-acclaimed novel on the partition of India, *A Train to Pakistan* (1955). His stories are collected in *The Mark of Vishnu and other Stories* (1950), *A Bride for the Sahib and other Stories* (1967) and *Black Jasmine* (1971). He was awarded the Padma Bhushan Award in 1974 but what happened was he returned the honour of decoration in 1984 in protest against the Union Government's siege of the Golden Temple, Amritsar, as he considered it a harm against the Sikh Community. Apart from being a sensational journalist sharing his sense of humour, understanding of human foibles, concern for the deteriorating human material and love for wild life in particular, he has established himself as a distinguished Indian writer.

Khushwant Singh made his debut as a writer more by accident than by choice. The events of 1947 shook him terribly that he chose writing so as to give vent to his indignation. It was only the particular troubles which screwed in an interest in Khushwant Singh to become a literary figure. No novel in English by an Indian about the partition was written until 1956, the year in which *Train to Pakistan* was published only after this, Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961), Manohar Malgonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975), Kartar Singh Duggal's *Twice Born Twice Dead* got published. Majority of the novels on partition are by the Sikhs – Khushwant Singh, Raj Gill, H.S.Gill, K.S.Duggal. The reason has been rightly traced thus: "The interest of the Sikhs in the partition is understandable. The Punjab was their prosperous homeland ... the class distinction showed itself. Hence it is natural for the Sikhs to remember this dire event" (Sharma 161). Khushwant Singh excels the list as G.P.Sharma observes: "Historical events

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have not been transformed into a proper artistic creation as in Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*" (P249). In both *Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, the political disturbances provide the theme for Khushwant Singh. Sikhism, with its positive and negative traits gets reflected through judicious characterization. Truly speaking, Khushwant Singh's novels do significantly explore the religiosities, histories and the social status of the Sikhs, which become tokens of the author's Sikh consciousness. M.L. Mehta rightly holds:

Singh's novels are an attempt at artistic exploration of various facets of the Sikh way of life. His declination of the Sikh ethos in his novels widens one's awareness of the Sikhs as a distinct entity. (P 104).

Through *A History of the Sikhs*, Khushwant Singh has endeavoured to present a definitive historical survey of this powerful, virile, religious and adventurous Sikh community. The central theme is based on a native Punjabi spirit. Not only have political histories the privilege of attaining an art form but also religious histories, in addition, become art. Marjorie Boulton aptly writes: "In every author's work, there is a "selection, a picking out of some aspects of life for attention and a proportion" (P 144). For example, Vir Singh, Satwant Kaur, Baba Naudh Singh and Vijay Singh selected for their central theme the heroic and chivalry of the Sikhs and the ethnic nobility of their religion. Khushwant Singh finds his formula in the Sikh religion, for both of his novels have been written from the Sikh view point. They are nothing but a fictional re-creation of an intensely felt experience in which Mr. Singh's delineation of the Sikh way of life is characterised by his "instinctive understanding of the Sikh psyche which finds fearlessness, valour and heroic sacrifice" (Mehta 94).

Khushwant Singh's experiences of belonging to the minority group – the Sikhs – is the reason for the profound Sikh elements in his novels. It is sensed in the way he lets out his urge to identify his faction through art. Art is not an acceptance for him but it acts as a refuge. To Mr. Singh, art is never an acceptance of the deformities in life. Even though the identity crisis clouds his mind, he is not prepared to reject life. He is positive in his approach to art which succours as an anchor for his minor discordances. Suffering and creativity go hand in hand. The argument is that only those who suffer understand human condition better. Life in constant tension develops hidden talents in man. The alienated feeling in Khushwant Singh finds vent through the social and religious factors of Sikhism outpoured in the novels. There are several reasons why the Sikhs, who are proud of their heritage, more than any other section in this country, feel estranged from the national mainstream. The reasons need to be profited out from the Sikhs' history, from their early periods. The Sikhs are largely farmers and soldiers. Having brought the Green Revolution to India, they are the most prosperous peasantry in India. Next to farming, their favourite profession is soldiering. During World War I, almost a quarter of the British Indian Army was Sikhs. Khushwant Singh proudly says, More Sikhs had gone to jail and to the gallows in the freedom movements than those of

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any other community in India – Hindu, Muslim or Christian (*I Shall Not Near the Nightingale* 117).

Race, Language, Culture, Religion and the growth of social and moral ethos of the Sikhs contribute the making of their history. Punjab, the main gateway of India, became the first home of all the conquerors. Punjab Nationalism was born under the fact that the people – Hindus and Muslims – wanted to live and let live. Sikhism had its birth out of a wedlock between Islam and Hinduism. Dharam Singh in this connection rightly observes, “Sikhism was born in an Indian society where Hinduism was the dominant religion and Islam was the faith professed by the ruling class” (P 7).

The word ‘Sikh’ is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Shishya’ which means ‘disciple’. The Sikhs are disciples of their Ten Gurus beginning with Guru Nanak (1469 – 1539) and ending with Gobind Singh (1708). The institution of Ten Sikh Gurus is an essential component of the Sikh faith since the Sikhs believed that the Guru’s necessary for enlightenment. The blood of Sikhism in Khushwant Singh does not end in writing a history and confirming his bias towards it. Both his novels show the presence of a Sikh author. Both *A Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* are the novelist’s self-expression and a yearning for identity. No wonder, the Sikh community becomes the central aspect of both novels. In a novel, the details of the background add to the sense of reality and come as a Messiah to inform about the world which is in the novelist’s sense of imagination. In this regard, it would be pertinent to note that R.K. Narayan acquaints the readers with the ‘Tamil’ way of living and Khushwant Singh with the Sikh way. The domination of the Sikhs in Mano Majra in *Train to Pakistan* is visualised by the novelist. It is a Sikh village where “an Iqbal Singh would no doubt get a better deal even if his hair was shorn and his beard shaved than an Iqbal Mohammed or an Iqbal Chand” (TTP 32). Situated half a mile away from the river Sutlej, the Ganges of Sikhs, Mano Majra is shown as a bastion of Sikh culture in *Train to Pakistan*. In the village, the Muslims do not enjoy prosperity. They are tenants while the Sikhs are the land-owners. Mano Majra stands in juxtaposition to Kanthapura and the gloriously comic Malgudi. This representative village of Punjab is inhabited by Sikhs who are meticulous in their observance of religious rituals.

The gurdwara is the nucleus of all rituals. The novelist in a self-conscious manner paints a picture of the gurdwara: “On the flag was the Sikh symbol in black, a quoits with a dagger running through and two swords beneath... At the end ... the Granth lay wrapped in gaudy under a velvet awning” (P 30). Meet Singh, the priest greets Iqbal with a traditional ‘Sat Sri Akal’. Meet Singh’s insistence on preserving the sanctity of the gurdwara, is perhaps the novelist’s desire to air the faiths of Sikh religion who are ignorant of it:

This is a gurdwara... you must have
Your head covered and you must not
bring in any cigarettes or tobacco

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nor smoke (P 31).

The different Sikh characters in the novel are highly generic of their social types. They highlight different facets of the Sikh ethos as observed by Walsh, “*Train to Pakistan* with its varied and strongly individualised characters, its sense of place and ethos, its feeling for the spirit and style of the Sikhs are the products of resourceful imagination”. (P99).

Of all the characters, Juggat Singh symbolises the Sikh tradition of valour, heroic action and sacrifice. His love for Nooran, the Muslim weaver girl proves him worthy of the edicts of the gurus who waged crusade against caste and creed. After being released from the prison, Jugga goes to the gurdwara. Though he is not a pious man, he visits the gurdwara for solace. Meet Singh reads the holy book for him thus, summing up the ethical code of the Sikhs, “If you are going to do something good, the Guru will help you; if you are going to do something bad, the Guru will stand in your way. If you persist in doing it, he will punish you till you repent and then forgive you” (TTP 52).

Sikh militancy is yet another facet of Sikh consciousness. This is evoked through Jugga. The author has conceived Jugga in the addition of Sikh Guru martyrs. Just as Nanak is a symbol of harmony and sacrifice, Jugga lives up to the Sikh Suffix ‘Singh’. The ideal is evoked in Guru Gobind’s verse:

With clasped hands this boon I crave
when time comes to end my life
Let me fall in mighty strife. (31)

In this context, the comments of Harrex on Jugga’s final action are worth quoting:

The heroic motive that the noblest end for a
Sikh was to die for his state and the
idea celebrated by Nanak that action is a

means to salvation are implied by Jugga’s
self-sacrifice. (P 180)

The different kinds of Sikh traits are also brought out. Khushwant Singh has used Malli and the self-styled leader as a metaphor to suggest the militant trait. As a means of defence against religious persecution, Sikh militancy came into being as a reaction against Muslim dominance. The successive martyrdoms of the Gurus steeled the nerves of the Sikhs. The Guru’s words are given a different connotation by the militants:

In the name of Nanak,
By the hope that faith doth instill,
By the grace of God,
We bear the world nothing but good will. (TTP 132).

Apart from Sikh characterization and modes, passages which read like to treatises on Sikhism are also abundant in *Train to Pakistan*. Khushwant Singh’s description of Jugga

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waving the fly whisk over Meet Singh's head while the latter is reciting a verse from a small prayer book which he had put to his forehead before opening it, is a self-conscious attempt on describing the Sikh method of worship. The atmosphere prevalent in the gurdwara at prayer time is described:

In the gurdwara, Meet Singh, sitting beside
the Book which was folded up in Muslim on
a cot, was reciting the evening prayer... The
Ceremony ended with shrouts of 'Sat Sri Akal'
and the beating of a drum. (P 40)

The epilogue to the morning prayer is also accounted:

Air, water and earth of these are we made,
Air, like the Guru's word gives the breath of life
To the babe born of the great mother Earth
Sired by the Waters (P 151)

What prevents the novel from being a piece of propaganda is the fine blending of Sikh touch with the partition trauma.

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale has its action in a middle-class Sikh family in Punjab. The effects of war and nationalism on this family is the main focus of this novel. But a Singh is forced by circumstances to play a double game. He encourages his son to the Britishers. Sher Singh, like Iqbal in *Train to Pakistan* is a failure as an educated youth. Sher Singh is also a failure as a freedom-fighter. He engages himself in terrorist activities. He is ready to expose his friends when he is caught. It is Sher's mother who keeps up her moral faith and advises her son not to expose his friends:

If he named the people who were with him,
he would be doing a greater wrong. He was
no longer to be regarded as a Sikh and
I was not to see his face again. (ISNHTN 208)

Alone, of the Buta Singh household, she strives to keep the Sikh religion alive. Sabhrai has a counterpart in *The Lake of Psalms* by Romesh Chunder Dutt. Dutt's old mother is the purest in Hindu character. Hindu religion and the Hindu way of life. In the words of M.L.Mehta,

Sabhrai is a fictional realization of the
glorious Sikh ideals: an abiding faith in
the efficacy of prayer, love for all and malice
towards none ... ideals established by great
Sikh women like Mai Bhago, Mata Sundari
and Mata Gujri (P 162)

Khushwant Singh depicts Jugga as a replica of Sikh martyr and Sabhrai as a paragon of Sikhism. She commands respect from John Taylor too:

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“She has the dignity of an ancient people
behind her. Without knowing her, I have
respect for her” (ISNHTN 220).

Sabhr Rai stands for pure motherhood as Maxim Gorky’s *Mother*. Sabhr Rai’s characterization is a sign of the author’s picturization of an impeccable Sikh life. Sabhr Rai’s feeling of embitterment on hearing derogatory references on Sikhs, her insistence in prayer and worship, visits to the temple are evidences. She is “possessed of that sixth sense which often goes with people of deep religious convictions” (P 125). Sabhr Rai is spiritually wedded to the Guru. At the time of her death, she tells her husband,

I don’t need a doctor...

Let me go to my Guru with your blessings. (P 233)

According to Sikhism, the loves of God involves what James Kellock theorises:

... . both a detachment and an attachment –
a detachment from selfish comforts, interests,
fears and passions and a sincere attachment
to a reality beyond all appearances
attract us itself by truth and goodness” (P 28)

Sabhr Rai’s life is an illustration of the mystic principle of detachment in attachment preached by the Sikh Gurus. This agony of her soul is healed by her faith in the Guru who is her real guide in life. The Guru “riding his roan stallion across a stream” (ISNHTN 204) appears in her vision. The Guru had lost all his four sons and she had to lose only one. Her chilled veins are infused with warm blood when she remembers the Guru and his sacrifice. She installs courage in herself by reciting his stirring lines:

Eternal God, who art our shield
The dagger, knife, the sword we wield
To us protector there is given
The timeless deathless Lord of Heaven (204)

The hymns and holy verses quoted frequently from *The Granth* become an integral part of Sabhr Rai’s Sikh sensibility. Khushwant Singh has rendered both positive and negative images of Sikhism in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Sher Singh adopts violence as a polity and declares:

“We are Sikhs who do not fear
any enemies. We shall destroy
all those who stand in our way” (P39).

He cues one of a Sikh character in *A Bend in the Ganges* who, too, declares:

“Non-violence is the philosophy of
Sheep, a creed of cowards” (P23).

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Even very minor details of Sikhism effect merit to a good extent. The traditional Sikh procession is graphically picturised in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*:

“It (the crowd) was over a mile long with
brass bands, parties of singers on top of
motor lorries ... with the flower-bedecked
van which carried the Holy Granth guarded
by five Sikhs with drawn sword” (P40).

The Sikh mode of prayer too is visualized in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*:

“The family recited the names of the Ten
Gurus, the important Shrines, and the martyrs.
The rubbed their foreheads in front of the
Holy Book and the ‘per shed’ was stirred
with a dagger” (P82).

The down-to-earth aspects of Sikhism are made clear by Singh’s mingling of the spiritual and the sensual. In India, Sikhism stands as a different religion from other ones, due to the insistence of certain codes – from the way of dressing to the observance of rituals. Khushwant Singh has explored it rather thoroughly by giving a fictional touch to the religion itself.

To conclude, it may be said that Khushwant Singh has proved himself to be a representative of Sikhism by projecting the Sikh codes and behaviour in both the novels so as to show Sikhism as a unique element in the world of religion.

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