

# Khushwant Singh: Beyond a Mere Story Teller

## Abstract

This paper is a preliminary enquiry into literary genius of Khushwant Singh. A sincere attempt has been made to highlight some of the features and qualities of the literary work of one of the most popular modern Indian writers.

It is not possible to include all the literary traits that eventually made Khushwant Singh a great author and a leading literary figure. Through the present enquiry, the readers will merely get a glimpse of his literary genius.

I never met Khushwant Singh in person. However I was fortunate enough to receive a letter (post card) which bore his signature. I consider it to be my most precious treasure.

**Keywords:** Malice, Secular, Human Values, Pseudo Piety, Spectrum

## Introduction

Khushwant Singh (1915-2014), is one of the most famous Indian writers. He is a versatile and prolific writer of English. He is extremely popular columnist, short story writer and a great novelist. His short stories have been prescribed in various school boards in India. His writings encompass wide variety of subjects such as history, politics, anthropology, religion etc. to name a few. His weekly columns which appeared in a number of newspapers and magazines covered almost all the areas of human activity. He has been editor of renowned magazines including *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and newspapers like *The Hindustan Times* etc.

His famous weekly column 'With Malice Towards One and All' appeared for decades in almost all the important dailies of India- English, Hindi as well as regional languages. These columns are social and political commentaries on contemporary India. He also tried to spread higher values through his writings. One such value that he always advocated was communal and religious harmony of India.

## A Truly Secular Indian

In one of the articles which appeared in a local newspaper he wrote about a temple situated in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. He was once invited there to attend a programme organized by Rotary Club of India. In Bareilly, he visited a temple which was constructed with active support of a local muslim businessman by the name Fazal-ur-Rehman alias Seth Chunna Miyan. The temple after its completion was inaugurated by the then president of India, Shri Rajendra Prasad. Khushwant Singh highly praised the virtue of the people who were part of this project.

It inspired the author of this paper so much that he prepared a script for a documentary film based on the temple. Eventually Doordarshan Kendra, Lucknow accepted it and a documentary film was produced. It was telecast several times by Doordarshan Kendra, Lucknow and the national channel of Doordarshan.

## A Peep into the Literary World of Khushwant Singh

Khushwant Singh began to write very late in life, he more than compensated it by the quality and volume of his literary work. He is a master in the art of story- telling. But his genius does not end there and he is much more than a great story teller. His short stories, articles and novels mirror the contemporary Indian society, its people and culture. His writings both entertain and educate.

His characters have been picked from real life. Even the fictional characters appear real. He covers a large spectrum of society. The list includes his own grand mother, his wife and children, his friends, people from all walks of life- films, literature, politics, social workers to name a few.

His novels have made a mark in the literary world. The most talked about novels of Khushwant Singh are *The Train to Pakistan* and *Delhi*. *The Train to Pakistan* has a climax that establishes the supremacy of sacrifice in true love. *Delhi* is a bouquet of interesting characters including a eunuch. It offers the reader a glimpse into Indian history.



**Krishna Gopal**

Assistant Professor,  
Deptt .of Applied Sciences and  
Humanities,  
Rama University,  
Kanpur (U.P.)

He has depicted many famous persons in his writings, contemporary as well as historical. Aurangzeb, Meer Taqi Meer, Maharaja Ranjeet Singh, Nadir Shah (the Iranian invader) and Mohammad Shah (Rangeela), are just a few examples. He did extensive research before he went to create these characters. That is precisely why they look so real. Through his characters Khushwant Singh speaks with his readers.

#### Emphasis on Human Values

Some critics accuse Khushwant Singh of obscenity in his writings. They say that sex is his first priority. There may be some amount of truth in their accusations. However one should not overemphasize it and unnecessarily ignore what is good in his stories, articles and novels.

He has expressed his views on religion, ethics, social customs, and politics to name a few. Khushwant Singh even talks about human behavior and psychology.

His novel *Delhi* which took him more than twenty years to write contains many important thoughts and interesting pieces of information. Some of them are given below:

About pride and arrogance he says;

Tell this fool whose arrogance  
makes his neck veins swell!  
Pride corrupts religion, weakens the  
mind, destroys reputations.  
So take heed! <sup>1</sup>

He quotes Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, on the nature of true religion:

“I believe that the best way to serve God is through love of his creatures.” <sup>2</sup>

Through the preaching of Khwaza Nizamuddin Auliya he gives a message to the people on oneness of God,

“There is only one God though we call Him by different names. There are innumerable ways of approaching Him. Let everyone follow the way he thinks best for him. His path may lead to the mosque or the tabernacle, to a temple full of idols or to a solitary cave in the wilderness. What path you take is not important; what is important is the manner in which you tread it. If you have no love in your heart then the best path will lead you into the maze of deception.” <sup>3</sup>

Then he writes a Sufi catechism;

Who is the wisest of wise men?  
One who rejects the world.  
Who is the saintliest of all saints?  
One who refuses to change with changing circumstances.  
Who is the richest of rich men?  
One who is content.  
Who is the neediest of the needy?  
One who has no contentment. <sup>4</sup>

How to be content? The Khwaza replies, “Reduce your wants to the barest minimum, conquer your nafs (desires).

Read the following passage where Nadir Shah speaks to himself:

“On Saturday, 5 May 1739, we left the capital city of the Moghals. There were

only two people with whom we left some of our heart. This was the sharp-tongued Hakeem Alavi Khan and the other the saucy Noor Bai. An Emperor may command anything within his empire except an honest man and a woman's heart. We could have forced both to accompany us but we knew that the old man would not be able to make the journey. Noor Bai could have cried all the time. We realized that we could take her body with us, but her heart would remain behind in Delhi. And what is a woman's body if her heart not be in it!” <sup>5</sup>

The last sentence where he emphasizes the importance of a woman's heart is very important. It may remind the learned readers of *the Ramayana* where *Ravana*, after abducting *Sita Ji* keeps her in a garden called *Ashoka Vatika* and decides to wait for her consent. By saying this I do not intend to give him any clean chit. Eventually *Ravana* received punishment for his deeds. It has a clear message to the rapists who, in their lust do not remember this simple and yet very important moral principle. Of course they are guilty of the most heinous crime and deserve the most severe punishment. Nevertheless Khushwant Singh does well to raise the issue.

At another place Hakeem Alavi Khan tells Nadir Shah, “If you do not learn to control your temper, your temper will control you.” <sup>6</sup>

And also:

“... anger is a species of madness. If not checked, it becomes incurable.” <sup>7</sup>

At another place he quotes the words of Hazrat Ali Murtaza, “Often a word pierces like a sword and the tongue can have a sharper point than the lance.” <sup>8</sup>

On one occasion he quotes the admonition of Shaikh Saadi, the famous poet of Persia.

“He whose wishes you fulfil will obey your orders  
But passion when obeyed will forever command.” <sup>9</sup>

Now, who on earth can refute the wisdom of these words?

In this novel Khushwant Singh brings to the light some interesting facts of history. He quotes a few lines from a letter that emperor Shahjehan wrote to his son Aurangzeb when the latter cut off the water supply to the fort in Agra where the former was living. Shahjehan writes:

“Why should I complain of the unkindness of fortune, seeing that not a leaf is shed by a tree without the will of Allah? Only yesterday I was master of 9,00,000 troops, and today I am in need of a pitcher of water! Praise be to the Hindus who offer water to their dead, while my devout Muslim son refuses water to the living!” <sup>10</sup>

Aurangzeb's own daughter wrote the following lines to him before her death.

I have experienced such cruelty and harshness in this land of Hind, I shall go and make myself home in some other country. <sup>11</sup>

These are some of the historical facts revealed in this novel.

Also look at a witty social comment that he makes on the people in the higher echelon of the society and their pseudo piety.

"Next we passed a newly built mosque. This, we were told, had been erected by Nawab Raushan- ud- Daulah, the keeper of Mohammad Shah's treasury. Although it was small, its marble and gold spoke eloquently of the wealth of the treasury keeper. (We later learnt that Raushan-ud-Daulah was a notorious bribe-taker. As in Iran, so in Hindustan money-makers were also the builders of mosques.)"<sup>12</sup>

Another example of a comment on the contemporary Delhi in the early eighteenth century at the time when Mohammad Shah (Rangeela) (mis) ruled Delhi.

"At the gate of the next bazaar, Dariba, silversmiths presented us with silvers inlaid with precious stones. Some of them were allowed to touch our stirrups before they flung palmful of coins in our name to beggars who abounded in the city."<sup>13</sup>

These lines amply speak about the disparity between the rich and the poor and also the rampant poverty among the masses during Moghal rule.

I quote a passage from his book, *India: An Introduction* where he shows his concern for the serious and innumerable problems that India is faced with.

"Governments come and governments go: the problems of the country remain. At the dawn of new millennium, India is among the ten poorest countries of the world and more than half its people are poor and unlettered. Its two most important problems which have been barely touched by succeeding governments are its explosive rate of population growth and rapid degradation of the environment."<sup>14</sup>

To end this article I would like to quote Khushwant Singh once again. He himself quotes Nathaniel Cotton (1707-88) because it sums up his own feelings:

If solid happiness we prize,  
Within our breast this jewel lies,  
And they are fools who roam.  
The world has nothing to bestow;  
From our own selves our joys must flow,  
And that dear hut, our home.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusion

In his writings, no doubt one may find passages and references that may be termed as obscene or classified as explicit description of sex, but at the same place one may find precious words of wisdom scattered, here and there. Most of us know that in the process of *Samudra Manthana* the churning of the ocean both *amrit* (elixir of life) and *halahal vish* (the deadliest poison) were produced.

The writings of Khushwant Singh are very rich in content. One may come across things that do not cater to one's taste. A rose is accompanied with

thorns. Take what you like and leave the rest. Don't we follow the same rule in other spheres of life?

**You may admire him, you may abhor him but you cannot ignore him.**

### References

1. Singh, Khushwant. *Delhi*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India (P) Limited, 1990. 64. Print.
2. Ibid p.p. 56
3. Ibid p.p. 67
4. Ibid p.p. 68
5. Ibid p.p. 192
6. Ibid p.p. 188
7. Ibid p.p. 189
8. Ibid p.p. 181
9. Ibid p.p. 170
10. Ibid p.p. 155
11. Ibid p.p. 161
12. Ibid p.p. 176
13. Ibid p.p. 177
14. Singh, Khushwant. *India: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Vision Books Pvt. Ltd, 2014. 211. Print.
15. Singh, Khushwant., and Quiraishi, Humra. *Absolute Khushwant*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India Private Limited, 2010. 14. Print.