

THE RACONTEUR: "TRUTH OF SUBSTANCE" IN THE STORIES OF KHUSHWANT SINGH

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"When the world is itself draped in the mantle of
night, mirror of the mind is like the sky
in which thoughts twinkle like the stars"

(Khushwant Singh, *Delhi*)

The man who is known for his "acid wit", tongue-in-cheek remarks, trenchant secularism, the one who brings a gleaming smile on everybody's face and a man people love to hate and may even agree "not a nice man to know" or more so referred to as "a clumsy journalistic writer"-Khushwant Singh has been the symbol of knowledge, wisdom, determination, and wit for his worldwide readership. Singh is one of the best Indian English writers, among the other literary dignitaries like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K Narayan, Raja Rao, Shashi Deshpande etc. His writings are passionate and speak his mind and soul. His was an "honest pen" which took a toll on his personality as a writer. Singh had a versatile career and talents from being a diplomat, a scholar, a lawyer, a gossip columnist, a journalist to a widely read writer and as a story writer his art was quite abiding. Right from his youth even before becoming a writer people around him admired his skill of storytelling, this indicates story writing as an inherent quality in him which was showcased in his works.

The Post and Pre-independence period saw the upheaval in the conventional cultural scene, shifting from Indian to western culture in literature and this has been

evident from the great works written during this period like *Kanthapura* (Raja Rao), *Untouchables* (Mulk Raj Anand) where we can see the impact of British or Western culture on the Indian writers. Alok Bhalla has shown that the act of writing as a means of coming to terms with the events of 1947 is characteristic of largest part of partition literature (Bhalla). Although Khushwant Singh was one of them, his individuality lies in the fact that his works indicate equanimity of both western and Indian culture with his subtle control over the English language, which is evident in his magnum opus, *Train to Pakistan*. In the novel, upon Juggut and Iqbal's release, they learned that a gang was planning to attack the train taking Mano Majra's Muslim population to Pakistan, they each had the potential to save the train, though it was recognized that this would cost their lives. Juggut, nevertheless, acts on instinct after he found out about the fiasco that was going on, then he sacrifices his life to save the train. Iqbal spends pages wondering to himself whether he should do something, exposing a moral paradox on the way:

The bullet is neutral. It hits the good and bad, the important and the insignificant, without distinction. If there were people to see the act of self-immolation . . . the sacrifice might be worthwhile: a moral lesson might be conveyed . . . The pint of sacrifice . . . is the purpose. For the purpose, it is not enough to know within one's self that one is in right.

The novel was published, for the first time, in 1956, almost ten years after the events that found their way into the novel. In an interview in 1968 Singh declared:

I really don't think it [*Train to Pakistan*] is a very good novel because I think it's a documentary, and I've given it a sugar-coating of charming characters and a story. Basically, it is a documentary of the partition of India, an extremely tragic event which hurt me very much. (Singh 1968-69: 28)

In this quote we encounter the individual Khushwant Singh as a victim, trying to make sense of his experiences in the light of the fact that “Wounds inflicted by partition will take long, long time to heal” (Singh 2006: xxiii).

This is his morality where he questions the very conscience of man, what is and how good or bad is rewarded or punished. This question reverberates in many of his other works. His craftsmanship is such that he leads to a resolution where one finds not the ending but a conviction which makes one believe the beguiling nature of man and how God is not a power outside it is the very realization of one's consciousness of the evil and good. In his other highly acclaimed work, ‘I shall not hear the nightingale’ (1959) he again reveals the dark history of British raj where people were caught in the web of “Westernism” and the native informants of the British were left in devastation after the unscrambling of their relationship. Singh has been able to develop a rapport with his readers through his candidness; he is one of the finest historians and a social critic along with his unbridled tongue and spirit which quantified his concavity, he is many things to many people but his common attributes that have been the reason of “idiosyncrasy” are his honesty, harmony of his mind, heart and tongue. His honest views and ideologies regarding love, women, and politics and raising scruples against some revered icons of the nation, It has been observed that at times he often offended his closest friends like the Gandhi's in *The Good, The Bad and The Ridiculous* (2013). Even at the cost of jeopardizing his stature in his works like ‘Truth, Love and Malice’ the autobiography deals in depth with his relations with political dignitaries and the effect of the prominent events which shaped him. His rough experiences with his senior Krishna Menon reveal the biased nature of the officials where nepotism disheartened the devoted employees.

Why Menon got where he did under the patronage of Pandit Nehru remains, and probably will remain unexplained. Panditji had him elected to parliament and sent to the United Nations to lead the Indian delegation, his marathon

thirteen-hour speech on Kashmir won India a unanimous vote against it. He was then made the Defence Minister against the wishes of almost all the members of the Cabinet. He wrecked army discipline by promoting favorites over the heads of senior officers. He was vindictive against those who stood up to him. More than anyone else he was responsible for humiliating defeat of our army at the hands of the Chinese in 1962. Pandit Nehru stuck by him to the last. (*Truth, love and Malice*)

“A sacrifice to be real must cost, must hurt, and must empty ourselves” Mother Teresa rightly explains the sacrifices Singh made as a writer for being rational, radical and most of all “real” which bore him controversy and several allegations.

His purpose is to bring out the individual, human element and provide a social understanding, two aspects of historical events which tend to be either ignored or not covered effectively in texts. (*Khushwant Singh: A Critical Study of his works* 221). His treatment of emotions, resolution, voicing the strong taboos of Indian society concealed under the mask of religion, his agonistic approach, insightfulness, providing amoral direction to the readers by portraying facts through fiction, became a benchmark in the Indian English literature. The character of Hukum Chand in *Train to Pakistan* justifies this very aspect of his style, when he encounters a conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims he starts to panic, the corrupt authoritative man he is, clearly provides an insight into the world of power hungry politicians who find their way for hoarding wealth in testing times like that of partition, Mr. Singh gives a vivid picture through his reaction, when he encounters two geckos, which likely represent Muslims and Hindus in conflict on the verge of fighting each other. When they start fighting, they fall right next to him, and he panics. The guilt he gets from not helping when he has more than enough power to do so literally jumps onto him: “Hukum Chand felt as if he had touched lizards and

they had made his hands dirty. He rubbed his hands on the hem of his shirt. It was not the sort of dirt which could be wiped off or washed clean”.

It is rightly said by Brandon Sanderson, “The purpose of a storyteller is not to tell you how to think but to give you questions to think upon” (*The Way of Kings*). Gigantic research was the basis for all of Singh’s works. Singh has lived the history’s prominent events both national and international, because of which he was able to fuse socio-cultural values and kept a pace with the current affairs of the world outside. With the blend of the colloquial and the eloquent in his works, Mr. Singh has evolved the contemporary literary regime into a serious literary vocation with his unique representation of India in its true colors. His excellence lies in short story writing as he is the master of story writing in the Indian literary scene. His inspirations have been many but in the realm of story writing O’ Henry has been a potent influence, he adhered to his tradition where in a ingenious and carefully constructed plot with a surprise ending, with elements of humor, wit, vivacity and light heartedness were the primary characteristics. Several of his stories like “The Portrait of a Lady,” “The Fawn,” and “A Love Affair in London” etc. have rounded perfection. Arthur Voss’ comment on O’Henry’s stories is indeed a definition of the short story as a unique and peculiar genre of literature:

Ingenuously and carefully plotted often culminating in a surprise ending, it was written more to entertain than to be taken seriously, wit and humor, vivacity and lightness of touch and an urbane manner and cultivated style were other principal characteristics.

Born in Hadali, a village in Pakistan in upper middle-class family, Khuswant Singh as a child was brought up under the fine guidance of his grandmother, he had a close attachment with his native land which is quite visible in his open expression of love for Pakistan and Urdu poets. His father Sir Sobha Singh was the first prominent builder in Lutyens’ Delhi. He rose to live a wealthy lifestyle but the zeal to stand on

his own feet made him work at positions he really despised, a lawyer or a foreign diplomat, although all the way long Singh captured the dubious practices of these government bodies. On the flip side, his acquaintance with criminals incorporated a deep interest in listening to the stories and attending the lower court hearing, where there were hearings of murder, dacoity, and village crime cases. He just liked to listen to the stories, this bestowed a great gift of magnificent storytelling and communicating ideas, where stories are not just fiction, but are rooted in life. (These experiences are relatable with another great raconteur like him who also was a member of the royal service probably 500 years ago known as the “Father of English literature”, Geoffrey Chaucer, being an insider of the government bodies, he really drew the real picture of the pretentious nature of all sections of society from gentry to the humble craftsmen in *The Canterbury Tales* there are certain identical features in both Singh and Chaucer, though Singh was quite reluctant as the corrupt practices of these departments did not entice him still they helped him to etch his characters in a broader spectrum. Literature is always believed to be the mirror of the society and it completely depends on the way a work is woven, which further depends on the skill of the author and his ability to adhere to the standards of a particular genre but these aspects are still redundant, there is still more acuteness attached to the art of expression through words and that is initiating a vision in the minds of the readers to stimulate the emotions lying dormant, leading to catharsis. All these are salient features which make a quintessential work of art of story writing. This consummate skill was inherent in Singh and Chaucer both. They broke the conventionality of their respective contemporary times. Chaucer talked openly about the mendacity, lechery, fornication, all sorts of malpractices in the garb of religion. He spared no one from the Reeve to the valiant Knight, from the Monk to the famous lustful Wife of Bath and even had the audacity to bring the ridiculous, scatological humor. Matthew Arnold in his critical essay “The Study of Poetry” reveres him for his “adherence to realism.” According to him, “his was a large, free, sound representation of things”,

that had “truth of substance”. This ‘truth of substance’ is the key for his exquisite virtue of style and manner. These quirky elements make Khushwant Singh and Chaucer two dimensions of the same coin. Furthermore, their characterization was not merely dependent on the theme of the story, in fact they were meant to paint an ironic and critical portrait of society. Their idea of expressing the obscenity and vulgarity did not restrict itself in the boundaries of entertainment but instigating the reader to give him an insight of his own “bitter realities”. And there are umpteen examples to support this view and few of these famous lines may justify their ability to mould the serious into the ridiculous,

Five husbands schooling’s done the same for me.

The sixth is welcome when he comes along;

I won’t be keeping myself chaste for long,

For when one husband from this world is gone

Some Christian man will wed me early on . . . (“Wife of Bath I”)

This dialogue of the wife of bath is an evidence of so many sinful activities of the time like lust, fornication and avarice, somewhere all her desires do indicate Chaucer’s nature of envisioning women voicing their needs which was quite peculiar to the norms for women. They were meant to follow patriarchal obligations and their social standing depended upon their loyalty towards their husbands irrespective of the husband’s infidelity. In a way he ignited the flame of feminism. Similarly, time and again we have also come across the same bravado in Singh’s works like *Sex, Scotch, and Scholarship* (1992), *The Company of Women* (1999). In the latter Singh portrays a man with all his elemental and carnal passions. Mohan Kumar, the protagonist of the story returns to India after having an education at the States. He marries a girl of a wealthy background and after few bouts of conflicts with his ill-tempered wife he decides to divorce her. Here Singh draws a line of

difference between love and lust, where a man once unsatisfied in his married life finds it as an excuse for adultery and quenches the thirst of sexual passions. Love and sex have been the recurrent themes in his works. According to him love and sex were essential aspects of human life. They channelize themselves in different stages of one's life and his decisions largely depend on the sense of security one gets from the availability of love and the gratification of physical needs. As for him love was fundamental for every human being in various forms from micro to macro level. Bottom-line is that a story is well wrought only when the writer speaks his mind and pens down words based on deep knowledge and not mere imagination. It is very appropriate to quote Chaucer's famous line, "People can die of mere imagination" if a reader is to be enlightened he needs to be "informed" of the reality, so that he does not lose the touch of practicality of life in the whim of entertainment and imagination. This expertise in the art of story writing and the quirks of language made them and their works laudable.

Chaucer's style was full of pithy and was epigrammatic in the sense that it was a scrutiny of society and human psychology, but it was not supposed to be taken seriously still it bore awareness on the part of the reader. All these qualities were unparalleled to Chaucer's contemporaries, which in the similar way have made Khushwant Singh "the dirty old man in Indian literature" in modern times where too conventionality and causality about sex, women and politics are still extant but unfortunately the adulation received by Chaucer did not match the stinging criticism of Singh, this very comfort of having a way with his words was what that made him the paragon of story writing in India. That Singh has cultivated the art of story writing is clear from the range of variety of stories, in almost all his stories in different ways like exaggerating for a comic appeal appears well in works like 'A Love Affair in London' (1989) opining about burning questions of the day in his

I shall not hear the Nightingale is a journey which explores the despicable side of India's history that of servile Indian government servants in the British regime, the characters and situations are utterly believable. Nissim Ezekiel in his review of this novel wrote: "Whatever else may be said about Khushwant Singh's second novel, it must be said that the characters in it are interestingly odious" (*The Man and the writer* 47).

The Portrait of a Lady: A Collection of short stories includes the delightful "The Sunset Club" where a trio of octogenarians discusses controversial issues and the intricacies of daily life. His prowess lies in his sense of humour, satire to induce laughter at unexpected times, to provide comic relief to the readers; they never feel a tinge of monotony when they go through the well-knit phases of his stories. Evidently, his works picture a protagonist who is in a conflict with himself or with the society his candor lies in the resolution of this conflict where he directs us towards a rational and pragmatic approach because of the realism that he presents through his story. Though stories are believed to be fictional but blending the real with imaginary was Singh's forte, a suited example can be "karma" where Mohan Lal, who is an anglophile and is proud of his oxford background and furthermore is fascinated by the English' as their culture was superior to the Indian in his eyes. His wife who is a genuine Indian woman travels by the lady compartment whereas Mohan Lal travels the first class suiting his grandeur, the ending is very comic when the English soldiers push him out with his luggage, we are not only satisfied with the touch of patriotic vein but also laugh at the pitiable condition of the bruised and injured Mohan Lal. Singh never intended to create an impact on the reader his idea was to simply "be" himself and the rest was the natural outcome. Another theme which reverberates in his works is death. His treatment of death is very divergent from other writers like Elliot, Hardy, Dickinson as they deal with this theme in a pessimistic way, Singh on the contrary views it from an optimistic angle in 'Absolute

Khushwant' the low down on life, death, and most things between. He talks about the inevitability of death:

You may or may not doubt the existence of god; you can't doubt the certainty of death". At 95, I do think of death. I think of death very often, but I don't lose sleep over it. I think of those gone. Where will they be? I don't know the answers: where you go, what happens next.

His belief in the Jain philosophy led him to the conclusion that death should be celebrated. The lines of his epitaph written a long time ago by him, justify his ideology about realism and the "truths" of life and how is rightly called the "King of sarcasm":

Here lies one who spared neither man nor god

Waste not your tears on him, he was a sod

Writing nasty things, he regarded as great fun

Thank the lord for he is dead, this son of a gun. (*The Hindu*. Retrieved, 7 May 2015)

"Burial at Sea" is another fine work with same finesse, it is a provocative, comic work with all his recurrent themes of love, lust, death, politics, and lashing out at the bogus religion, he brings out the hypocrisy of Indians who lose their sense of belongingness under the influence of British culture and the morality where emotional love lasts all the trials of one's life and transcends all the societal boundaries and "manmade" walls.

The study of his works reveals his multifaceted personality – he is uninhibited and erotic writer, and a superb craftsman, but above all he has been the man of his words, his oeuvre is a testimony of reality which is essayed by his complex characters. His keen insight and focused attitude provide a reflection on issues of

identity crisis, loss of tradition, effects of colonialism and other issues and hence he has become a true icon of secularism in this communally sensitive society and with similar "truth of substance" as remarked by Matthew Arnold for Geoffrey Chaucer in "The Study of Poetry."

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