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History reflected in the works of Khushwant Singh

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Abstract

This paper discusses about 'History reflected in the works of Khushwant Singh'. Khushwant Singh is not only a historian and novelist but also a political commentator and social critic. His profound knowledge of Indian history, political system and literary heritage established him as a great history fiction writer. His novels 'A Train to Pakistan' (1956), 'I Shall not hear The Nightingale' (1959), 'The Sikhs' (1963) and 'Delhi' are historical in setting. Khushwant Singh not only presents the bloody scenes of Pakistan, but also presents the harsh reality behind the screen. He depicts that it the poor and common people who suffer because of the wrong decisions of politicians, while officers, politicians and leaders manage to slip away quietly. Leaders had left the people helpless. Hukum Chand, deputy commissioner of district, is busy getting drunk and pawing the hired prostitute, Haseena. The common people have to face the pain of separation, Hindus and Muslims have to part despite the strong ties of affection between them.

Keywords: History, Khushwant Singh, The Nightingale, Hindus and Muslims

1. Introduction

"Recent history has thrust it upon us and those who regard it as 'outside their scope' will hardly bring the study of literature back into touch with the darkened fabric of our lives".

These ideas expressed by George Steiner show that history and fiction are inseparable. T.S. Eliot has also expressed his concern with historicity of temporaneity. He rightly says that history influences contemporary work and is influenced by it. Any work woven in the string of history is not only influenced automatically but also provides the writer an outline to fill in it the colors of his imagination.

Singh's 'A Train to Pakistan' (1956) is the most compelling account of partition of India. The novel presents a moving account of the tragedy of partition, set in a small Indian frontier village of Mono Majra. Partition of India brought with it violence, death, reshuffling of population, leaving behind painful memories and bearing the world be horrors. Kamleshwar in his short story 'How many Pakistans?' rightly depicts the traumatic memories of refugees. 'O God! You do not know how many Pakistan were created along with the creation of that one Pakistan. In how many hearts, how many places! The creation of that Pakistan solved nothing'.

The after math of any war, riot and border skirmish is the same. As Khushwant Singh writes, 'Ten Million people Muslims and Hindus and Sikhs were in fight by the time the monsoon broke, almost a million of them were dead, and all of northern India was in terror or in hiding'. Khushwant Singh's novel revolves round a small village on the banks of Sutluj. After the partition the peace and harmony, which prevailed in the village earlier, disappeared and suspicion and violence filled the air. Of the total number of people who moved across the borders 2800000 alone are supposed to have moved in 673 refugee trains.

'I Shall not hear The Nightingale', is located in pre partition period and concentrates on the inner tensions and external movements of a well-to-do Sikh family in Punjab from April, 1942 to April, 1943. It was the period of the quit India conflagration and relations between the bureaucracy and the people were strained. While Butta Singh, the senior magistrate in anxious to be on the right side of the government, his son Sher Singh is involved in the activities of terrorist group of students including Madan, who is a brilliant cricketer. Khushwant Singh observes and records his findings and unravels the conflicting loyalties. The triumph of the book is the portrait Sabhrai, Butta Singh's wife. His faith in Guru is unshakable.

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When Sher is arrested, she quietly says, “We shall have a non-stop reading of the Granth for two days and nights. The Guru will be our guide”. When the consensus in the family is that Sher should secure his release even going to the extent of betraying his comrades, Sabhrai keeps her own counsel. She spends a whole night in Gurudwara, seeking light.

The other novel of Khushwant Singh ‘Delhi’ is concentrated on the Indian Capital. It is blend of history, romance and sex. The narrator of the saga (which extends over six hundred years) is an ageing reprobate, who loves Delhi as much as he does the hidza whore Bhagmati. As he travels through space and history to discover his beloved city, we find it transformed and immortalized in our minds forever. The story progresses with chapter divided in narrations by poets, sultans, soldiers and white men. The novel takes into consideration the havoc that was worked upon Delhi during partition and post partition period. It also vividly picturises Hindu-Sikh riot in Delhi erupted by Indira Gandhi’s assassination. The picturisation of history in the novel commences from Mughal period of Zahirudin Babar and ends with the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Sometimes the novel appears to be a fine travelogue when Singh presents vivid pictures of various roads, lanes, historical places of Delhi in its real names, forms and features. The historical events in different chapters of the novel are endowed with sex and romance.

The fourth novel of the novel deals with hero, born in 633, which was the beginning of the reign of Sultan Ghiassuddin Balban. Then the narrator describes in succession Raja Anagpal, Prithvi Raj Chauhan, Mahammed Ghor, Sher Shah Suri, Babar, Aurangzeb, Nadir Shah, Shah Jehan, Dara, Marad, Shuja and Bahadur Shah Zafar. The painful picture of partition is presented in chapter 20, the last chapter of the novel gives a vivid and truthful description of killing of Bhinderwala and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and riots that erupted in Delhi in 1984.

Khushwant Singh’s novel “The Sikhs” also presents a history of his own community, recent history and political situation of India. In Singh’s novel we find sex, violence, intensity of passion and all the three unities, unity of time, place and action. Keeping the politics apart, his novels also uphold values of brotherhood. He has given voice to those people who could not utter their sufferings and anguish.

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