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A study of cultural and historical aspects in selected works of Khushwant Singh

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Abstract

It is only appropriate to attribute Khushwant Singh as one of the greatest historians, novelists, an excellent political analyst, an observer and societal activist in Indian literary history. This paper intends to explore the cultural and historical context in selected works of Khushwant Singh. It reflects the notion of culture concerning the discourse of civilization, philosophy, daily life, science and ideology. His books firmly rooted in contemporary India's modern history and political condition, include *Train to Pakistan* (1956), one of India's most convincing narratives in 1947; *The Nightingale* (1961) and *Delhi: A Novel* (1990). Khushwant Singh reared his head as a blunt rationalist with the release of his *Train to Pakistan* (1956). The effect of Partition on the Indian-Pakistan frontier is portrayed in this book. His second book, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959) presents an amusing image of a joint Sikh family symbolising the numerous reactions of Indians to the 1940's Independence struggle. Subsequently, *Delhi* (1990) and *The Company of Women* (1999) were also released on a similar note. In each of his books, he is acknowledged for his savage way of digging out the reality. This paper delves into his selective works reflecting his views on cultural and historical significance.

Keywords: Secularism, communal, partition, social milieu, humanistic concerns

Introduction

The historical significance of any work is illustrated through a first-hand experience and who can explain it magnificently other than Khushwant Singh. A man who is fluent in almost all the languages and is a household name in Indian English Literature does not require any introduction. A man, who has witnessed almost a century, has a bag full of real incidents to narrate to society. His insistence on the person's mind and his self-mockery enhanced the concept of self-analysis strategy. Some of Khushwant Singh's stories can be described as political too. Thus, it will be intriguing to fathom about the political instance through his amazing works. The striking feature about Khushwant Singh was that he always talked about what he witnessed. He was fair to himself and to society. He never emotionally cared about the sentiments and the feelings of community. He never tried to play safe and unceasingly offended his companion writers no matter what. Survival was never his priority. He was a man who always credited quality over quantity. Khushwant Singh has come to be considered as one of the best historians and novelists, as a direct media critic and as an excellent analyst and political theorist in Indian literary history. There is nothing wrong in comparing him to a free bird flying in the endless sky. All that mattered to him was to be bluntly honest.

"If you look at things as they are, there does not seem to be a code either of man or of God on which one can pattern one's conduct. Wrong triumphs over right as much as right over wrong. Sometimes its triumphs are greater. What happens ultimately, you do not know. In such circumstances, what can you do but cultivate an utter indifference to all values? Nothing matters. Nothing whatever..." (Singh, "Train" 181)

Khushwant Singh was born on February 2, 1915, in Hadali, Khushab District of undivided Punjab in a Sikh family. His parents moved to Delhi along with his elder brother for a better lifestyle. During this period, he got an amazing chance to live in Hadali with his grandmother. He was sincerely taken aback by the village life and the love showered by his grandmother on him. He counted this as one of the blessings from God to learn the real meaning of life from his grandmother.

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It was a small town with only three hundred families and a mixture of Sikhs and Muslims living together. His grandmother's persona had a significant influence on him. He was very close to her and spent most of his adolescent age with her. He wrote a short story called *The Portrait of A lady* in her memory. His grandmother's consistent reconciliation to *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* and *Sukhmani Sahib* had affected Khushwant Singh greatly and was probably the source of his religious curiosity. This prompted him to become a specialised Sikh in his later days. His grandmother's teaching about Sikhism influenced him to write a book, *The History of Sikhs*. In the morning, he recited the *Japji* Sikh prayer, composed by Guru Nanak Devji, the Founder of Sikhism.

While Khushwant Singh attended one of the best schools during his schooling in Delhi, he always said that those were his worst years. This was because he was not competitive at studies or sports and was most frequently bullied. School days of Singh have influenced his psyche and framed his very different vision of life. He came up with immensely diverse viewpoints, which were not generally understood by society. His trenchant secularity, mood, sarcasm, and lasting admiration for poetry made him a writer who stands out in a crowd. He is a man who has always valued cultural and historic changes, but fought for what he considered right. In 1974, he was awarded the Padma Bhushan, but he returned it in 1984 in protest against the Operation Blue Star. He has been honoured with the Padma Vibhushan and is also known as the Indian Malcolm Muggeridge.

Khushwant Singh has been described as India's Malcolm Muggeridge. He holds nothing sacred. He enjoys nothing more than dipping his barbed pen in a pot of vitriol and lambasting the establishment, the accepted order of things political, religious or social and puncturing inflated reputations. (Pathak 44)

Moreover, he never cared to make anyone acknowledge his ideology. He tried his hands almost in every field, as he was an Indian author, lawyer, diplomat, journalist and a politician. He entered one of the prestigious academic institutions at St Stephen's College, Delhi, but that was sadly not enough for him to build an appetite in scholarships and extracurricular work. Apparently, at this period, Khushwant Singh was instigated in his literary ambitions. He frequently attended Bible lessons. Therefore, he should be regarded as a secular man who respected every religion. Though not very devout, he was profoundly rooted in his Sikh origins and symbols. For him, religion is merely a way of life that teaches profound love, tolerance and morals.

So many gods, so many creeds, so
many paths that wind and wind
When just the art of being kind is all
that the sad world needs. (Singh, "The End" 65)

This paper gives an insight into the incremental transition of human and cultural beliefs. For the philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists and literary critics, the idea of community and culture concerning literature and anthropology is still the prominent question. Language, faith, arts and architecture, traditions, beliefs, morals, cooking, tastes, aesthetic expectations, family arrangements, self-esteem, sexual attitude, gender and poverty are just a

few significant factors of cultural history. In prominent Indian literary circles, Khushwant Singh is regarded as a leading scholar. His works largely focus on his memories and historical incidents. Punjab, London and Delhi, all three had a tremendous impact on Khushwant Singh's personal and professional life. Given his numerous trips abroad, one thing can be seen that while he has studied western thinking and action so closely, he kept his Indian self successfully alive. The amalgamation of both Western and Indian lifestyles is another characteristic of his style. He was not influenced by Western culture but came out as an unsentimental Western observer. Therefore, there is nothing wrong in giving him the title of a man with a modern mind but an Indian heart.

Train to Pakistan (1956) is an intensely emotional novel in which Khushwant Singh recounts the sad tale of the division between India and Pakistan and the resulting developments in recorded existence. On the eve of Indian separation, thousands fled to secure shelter and protection on both sides of the frontier. The indigenous people were displaced, and it was indeed a miserable time that they gave up their possessions and ran into the territory, not their own. Khushwant Singh's efforts in this novel were to see the happenings from the particular perspective of the people of Mano Majra, a village on the border of Pakistan and India. When Mano Majra's houses were destroyed, the quiet life immediately came to convulsion. The events narrated in the novel are only astounding. The true love story between Juggut Singh, the village gangster and his lover Nooran, a Muslim girl that was left incomplete at the end was heartbreaking. Their love story and the sufferings faced by Mano Majra was just a glimpse of the trauma faced by every Sikh and Muslim individual during the partition era. It is not the people who wanted to get separated and own different territories, but the dirty politics played by political parties.

Freedom is for the educated people who fought for it. We were slaves of the English, now we will be slaves of the educated Indians-or the Pakistanis. (Singh, "Train" 52)

In a historical context, the reading in parallel of literary and non-literary texts, usually within a similar period, is analogous to that of historical textuality and textual history. This approach was the basis for analysing literary texts such as history, society, politics, culture, literature. The current problems of everyday life should be discussed, analysed, exposed, blamed, and remedied in the history books. Many of the Indian novels are written to respond to the Gandhian Revolution, colonial rule, country's partition, and regarding the first-hand experience of historical events or revolutions. The fight for independence does include not only Indian authors, but also the whole people. Contemporary artists could not turn their faces from the influence of significant revolutions and dedicated their writings to the cause of freedom. Khushwant Singh's use of history often as the foundation of his works and accounts must be admired. History is a worthy truth and never lies. In addition, his curiosity has never been captivated by anything like history.

We, however, have some brilliant novels written about it.. several Indian-English fictionists, who have dealt with the theme of partition as competently as their counterparts in Hindi and Urdu and are in no way inferior to Yasphal, the writer of *Jhuta Sach*, Bhisham Sahni of *Tamas* and

Masum Raza Rahi the writer of *Adha Gaon*. Novelists like Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar and Chaman Nahal stand out prominently among those who have treated the theme of partition in detail, while R.K. Narayan, Balchandra Rajan and Attia Hosain deal with it cursorily in their novels. (Dubey 21)

Khushwant Singh tried his hands on nearly every field and country, but his impulse was always to come back to Delhi and write out his heart. It was never his priority to make money. Delhi has always been his first and last priority to get settled. No place has ever offered him that warmth except Delhi. He consistently mentioned Delhi as his first love in many of his works. No one could ever describe the transition of Delhi over the time as he did. He has witnessed almost ten decades in Delhi. A massive erotic magnum work, the best-selling book, *Delhi* (1990) is based on the Indian capital. An elderly reprobate, who loves the hijra slut Bhagmati as much as he loves Delhi, narrates a tale, which extends over six hundred years old. As he journeys through time, space and history to "explore" his favourite city, it is completely transformed and immortalised. Singh's great accomplishment as a writer comes from an incredible virtue: for the reader, he writes, not for himself. He appears to be referring to the reader specifically, shrugging from the ends of the written document.

That's Delhi. When life gets too much for you, all you need to do is to spend an hour at Nigambodh Ghat, watch the dead being put to flames and hear their kin wail for them. Then come home and down a couple of pegs of whisky. In Delhi, death and drink make life worth living (Singh, "Delhi" 12)

His narratives, therefore, contain unscrupulous rationality. *Delhi's* plot primarily revolves around culture, passion and sexuality in his third book. The novel recounts the Indian origin from the Zahiruddin Babar, the brutal rapes and killings of whites and Indians both and ultimate alarming assassination of Indra Gandhi. Khushwant Singh provided the royal city of Delhi with all its ancient roads in its actual shape and characteristics. This novel deals with a global past from multiple sub-continent eras. The novel reveals how past happenings played a pivotal role in defining Indian people's identities and perceptions. The overarching idea of the book is to discourage religion from influencing politics. The United Kingdom was well informed that the subcontinent people were so vulnerable to the belief that they abused it in its entirety, finally creating the foundation for the Partition of the world. He was not so concerned with how the world would respond to his works, but his only concern was to paint the facts. A novel can provide a clear picture of the history of Delhi, its rise, its decline and dirty politics.

Once through this ruined city did I pass
I espied a lonely bird on a bough and asked
'What knowest thou of this wilderness?'
It replied: 'I can sum it up in two words:
'Alas, Alas! (Singh, "Delhi" 224)

A History of The Sikhs penned in two volumes is the most genuine and detailed history of Sikhs. Khushwant Singh's distinctive style makes the volumes very readable and are

based on extensive analysis. This book discusses the social, religious and political requirements that paved the way for the establishment of the Sikh faith and the Sikh religion. It includes all the events that have shown the religion's increase and longevity between 1469 to the present day. Through this work, cultural and historical philosophy is mystically portrayed as the development of history, culture and religion through time.

Khushwant Singh in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* presents Indian-British Government imperial conference against Punjab's history. Punjab is renowned for its land with five rivers, geographical elements, military history and the Sikh faith. While politically, it refers to India, it is simple to distinguish from other cultural communities of India. Even though he focuses his attention on politics, Khushwant Singh tried to include a very microscopic image of Punjabi's life in the book. Besides the imperial war described in, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, and some very concrete and fascinating descriptions are in the book. Khushwant Singh was aware of the great authenticity and elemental of the Indians, particularly Sikh culture, as mentioned in a novel. Khushwant Singh was not intensely devout, but still valued the icons of Sikhism and practiced it. Unless the media is part of it, society cannot be thoroughly studied. Therefore, Khushwant still had hands-on journalism too. He wrote for several newspapers such as *The Yojna*, *The New York Times*, *The Tribune*, *The Independent Weekly*, *The Guardian*, among several more. He penned numerous columns and was admired for them.

Khushwant Singh's historical and cultural portrayals are accurate in his novels. In general, all the fictional works of Khushwant Singh serve a historical purpose and as such they are attempts to re-read the history of India from a minority, particularly Sikh, point of view. Therefore, his works are instances of minority discourse that need to be interpreted with reference to the public sphere they address to and express, or the politico cultural sphere in which they are located. Through his novels Khushwant Singh approaches certain important phases in the history of India such as the period of Muslims' rule of Delhi (which still lurks in our historical and political debates owing to the political conflicts the details of it roused following a clash of arguments between the followers of recent revivalist cultural tendencies and its opponents, mainly consisting of the Muslims and the left wing historians and thinkers); the freedom struggle where the roles played by each community, sect or political wing are debated quite earnestly by politicians, thinkers, academicians, again owing to the complaints of misrepresentation posed by some minority communities; and the partition of India that sowed seeds of communal violence, bloodshed and dislocation of people of both the sides.

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