

RESEARCH ARTICLE



KHUSHWANT SINGH'S SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE SIKH COMMUNITY AS REFLECTED IN HIS NOVEL 'TRAIN TO PAKISTAN'

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ABSTRACT

Khushwant Singh was a renowned journalist of his times. He had a great sense of humour with which he was identified in the literary world. A reader of his works can never miss the religious side in him which is evident in a subtle way in his works. He had taught comparative religions in U.S.A. and claimed himself to be an agnostic. But if one reads his novels *Train To Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear The Nightingale* his claims to be an agnostic seem to disappear with the significance he attaches to Sikhism in his novels. 'I was born a Sikh and have a strong sense of belonging to the Sikh community...' (Letter to the author dated Sep.21, 1993) The present study is a probe into his novel *Train To Pakistan*, (here after referred to as TTP) in the light of his Sikh consciousness. Khushwant Singh's experience of belonging to the minority group -the sikhs – is the reason for the profound Sikh elements in his novel. It is sensed in the way he lets out his urge to identify his faction through art.

KEY WORDS: Belonging, Identity, Khalsa tradition, Martyrdom, Partition, Sacred soil,

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Khushwant Singh was born in 1915 in Hadali, Punjab. He was educated at Government College, Lahore and at King's college and the inner temple of London. The partition of the country cut his career as a lawyer which was for him an inadequate source of income. The legal profession extended his knowledge of human nature and made him see man and life in the raw bereft of all embellishments. He can be said to be on par with Fielding, Scott, and Dickens, who were associated with the legal profession and got a discerning insight into human nature.

The sheer range of Khushwant Singh oeuvre is overwhelming. Except a treatise on mathematics, he has given a variety of contributions-reportage,

memoir, travel -writing, portraiture, translation, political journalism, essay, fiction, drama, history. And of course jokes which he cannot resist telling. His first novel is *TRAIN TO PAKISTAN* (1956), which was given the Grove Press Award. It would be useful to remember here that the history of partition is given an art form by Khushwant Singh.

Art is not an acceptance for Khushwant Singh, but it acts as a refuge. Both his novels *TTP* and *I SHALL NOT HEAR THE NIGHTINGALE* was written after the calamities of partition were over, but the guilt of having done nothing to save the bloody massacres had haunted him. He could be compared to Hawthorne, who wrote about the

excesses of puritanism, the only change here was about the excesses of partition.

The feeling of belonging to a minority group has not stopped with the partition riots alone, for the Sikhs. It continued upto 1984 at the time of the assassination of the then prime minister by two Sikhs. The novel TTP was written following the bloody massacres of 1947. But even if it is read today one could find that "history repeats itself"

The Sikhs' rise as a military power was spectacular. Under Banda Bahadur, Guru Gobind's disciple, they fought bravely, in spite of the loss of Banda's life. Maharajah Ranjit Singh is the biggest figure in Sikh history. He modernised his army. He rebuilt the temple at Amritsar with marble and covered its domes with gold leaf. Since then, it is popularly known as The Golden Temple, and is the holiest of the Sikhs' shrines. Khushwant Singh had the feeling that "Operation Blue Star" was Mrs. Indira Gandhi's miscalculation to allow the army inside the holy place of the gurudwara for which India had to pay a big price that culminated in her assassination. It was a sense of belonging towards the Sikh community which impelled Khushwant Singh to return the 'Padma Bhushan' in protest against the 'Blue Star' but the helplessness of being a witness to some fanatic deeds always haunted him.

The moment the news of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's assassination was announced officially, the fanatics decided to teach the Sikhs a lesson. At the break of dawn of November 1, rumours floated that the drinking water supply of the Sikhs had been poisoned. The lads from villages looted the houses. Young women were gang raped. Trains and buses coming in and out of Delhi were halted. Sikh passengers were identified and killed. Khushwant Singh's lament on being cornered in vast country is a representative voice of the completely Sikh community: "I was no longer a member of an over privileged community but one which was the object of dire hate" (My Bleeding Punjab 94) each one in the country became over-conscious of their community and the nationalist feeling had to be drained. He felt that he had been deprived of his birthright to mourn the assassination of his own Prime Minister.

His other two important works *A HISTORY OF THE SIKHS* and *MY BLEEDING PUNJAB* also present problems confronting the future of the Sikhs. First, since they are scattered all around the world the Khalsa tradition seems to weaken. Also the government's policy of encouraging Hindi as India's Lingua Franca has affected the study of Punjabi language in Gurmukhi script.

Both his novels and particularly TTP show the presence of a Sikh author. They are the novelist's self-expression and a yearning for identity.

The action of TTP centres on a tiny village, Mano Majra on the Indo-Pakistan border. The village is dominated by Sikhs, but it has Muslim and Hindu inhabitants. Khushwant Singh does not talk about the feedback of partition of the entire country. His area is Punjab and he doles out with creativity of how this village in Punjab is affected.

The novel opens with a scene of dacoity led by Malli, who in the course of action, murders Ram Lal. Juggat Singh popularly known as "budmash" is in love with Nooran, the daughter of a Muslim weaver. In spite of the Muslims and Sikhs being rivals from the earlier periods, Jugga is even prepared to lay down his life for the Muslim girl. He is arrested by the police, on suspicion. The village is awakened to life when Iqbal, a western educated social worker arrives. He is suspected to be a member of the Muslim League. He too is arrested for Ram Lal's murder by mistake.

Meanwhile the whole country is shaken by the partition of India into Hindustan and Pakistan. Mano Majra is worsely affected. The real drama begins when a train filled with corpses of Hindus and Sikhs arrives. The prevailing peace is routed. The friendship maintained by the Sikhs and the Muslims for years is shattered.

Hukum Chand, the magistrate releases Jugga and Iqbal to create peace. To be on the safe side, the Muslims start evacuating the village. Ironically Malli is appointed to look after their belongings. Nooran who is carrying Jugga's child receives no encouragement from Jugga's mother.

In the meantime, some Sikh fanatics gather near the gurudwara and plan to blow off the train, which carries Muslim refugees. In a retaliating mood, their wish is to send it as a "gift to Pakistan". Meet Singh, the priest could only pray.

Jugga comes to know of the evil deed. He cuts off the rope tied across the steel pan and the fanatics shoot at him. The train goes over him to Pakistan. Commenting on this final act Sunil Alhuwalia says, 'the novel indeed transcends its melodramatic character because of its stress on the true religion of man as against relieved only at the end, by an act of self-abnegation' (The Journal of Indian Writing in English 27)

The gurudwara is the nucleus of all rituals. The novelist in a self-conscious manner paints a picture of the gurudwara. Meet Singh, the priest greets Iqbal with a traditional Sat Sri Akal. Meet Singh's insistence on preserving the sanctity of the gurudwara is perhaps the novelist's desire to air the faiths of Sikh religion who are ignorant of it. The different Sikh characters in the novel are highly generic of their social types. They are the products of resourceful imagination with facets of Sikh ethos. Of all the Sikh 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 a crusade against caste and creed.

Sikh militancy is yet another facet of Sikh impression. The writer conceives Jugga in the tradition of Sikh guru martyrs. 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.' (The Fire and the Offering: The English language novel of India 1935-1970 180)

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 the Muslim dominance. The successive martyrdoms of the gurus steered the nerve of the Sikhs.

He has explored the religion thoroughly and has given a fictional touch to the religion itself. The drawing out of the uniqueness of the religion in fiction proves the religion to be a spectacular phenomenon that has allowed such an artistic touch. The novelist finds his literary order in the ethical form of the Sikhs. Even a lay reader, unaware

of the Sikh traditions goes well informed on reading the novel. What prevents the novel from being a piece of propaganda is the fine blending of Sikh touch with the partition trauma. The Sikh ingredients found in the novel are not just religio-ethnic dissertations. The mode of thought starts from being a Sikh and then widens to that of an Indian. He is usually associated with humour, but a sad undertone of a thirst for identity is the strand of his art. There is a bustle on his part to fix his community as a proud heritage of India.

The religious part is so much powerful in his work that he has not left even minor details on the aspects of Sikh religion. Good literature is about subtlety, sensibility and the human factor at the bottom of all things. A shrill political tone can reduce the work to a pamphlet, an instrument of propaganda relevant today, but dead tomorrow. He is just not a regional novelist with all his Sikh psyche and spirit. His concerns are humanistic. His characters are distinct entities in the grand panorama of life. The positive as well as the negative traits of the Sikhs are placed before the readers with pervasive irony. He hails the selflessness of the Sikhs. At the same time, his quill does not spare the illiterate Sikh priests like Meet Singh, the selfish Sher Singh, and the terrorist leader in TTP.

CONCLUSION

A great artist is of his age and as well as of his ages. He thinks ahead of his times. So does Khushwant Singh. His novels remain the forceful works born out of the agonised torments of body and spirit endured by the sacred soil of the five rivers. When political errors affect people in a major way, the consequences are inevitable. Lives had to be lost and properties damaged. Exploitation takes place at different levels. Bureaucrats like Hukum Chand arise. They are not bothered about the disruption of humanity. Politicians along with the police force are bent upon to safeguard their official position. In Hukum Chand and Iqbal's callousness lays the mentality of thousands of non-committal politicians of India.

The novel TTP seem to justify its author to be none other than a Sikh. Yet the objectivity in his art prevents him from being biased towards the Sikhs. He proves to be a representative of Sikhism

and is never a propagandist. The present study has given attention to his Sikh culture, but it is not an end, for he is an enigma meaning many a thing to his readers.

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