



SATIRICAL APPROACH TO THE SHORT STORIES OF KHUSHWANT SINGH

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ABSTRACT

The present study deeply explores the satirical approach adopted by Khushwant Singh in his short stories. It shows that the author, resorting to the weapons of satire, hold the vices, evils, follies and abuses, which are unflinchingly stalking the Indian socio-political and cultural milieu, up to severe ridicule and scorn with the humanitarian intent to rectify them for the well-being of the society in general and all humanity in particular. It also shows that the author relentlessly launches a scathing attack on the unscrupulous political leaders, anglicised brown sahibs, impostor sandhus, superstitious Indians and their belief in the bogus practices of astrology, palmistry, horoscope, numerology, vastu shastra to bring in home purgatory effects.

Keywords: Satire, deconstruct, vice, reconstruct, humanism, purgatory.

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Satire is the derivative of the Latin term 'satur lanx' meaning "medley, dish of colourful fruits". The satirical writing is rooted in the Latin literature. Though Quintilian was previously thought as the originator of satire, now it is attributed to Aristophanes who used satire first in his *Old Comedy*. Satire is a form of literary expression where follies, vices, shortcomings and abuses of the society and the individuals are ridiculed with the intent to rectify them. Satire is dyed with the colour of humanism. Satire is found in artistic forms of expression, including literature, plays, songs, arts. Satire intends to improve humanity by criticising the ills and evils which stalking the society. Satire deconstructs in order to reconstruct. Satire's greater purpose is often constructive criticism. The satirists are reckoned as moralists as they examine and differentiate the right from the wrong. Satire wants to introduce moral utopia in social, political and cultural arena. James Sutherland explicitly mentions the eternal value of the satire:

Satire, then, is not an extinct dinosaur or pterodactyl, row of yellow bones in the literary Museum, but a living and lively form thus has still a vital part to play in twentieth century literature. If the satirist cannot save us he can at least encourage us not to give up without struggle; and he can, and does, let in a current of fresh air which fills our lungs and keeps our blood in circulation. (*English Satire*, 22)

Satire uses, as its lethal weapons, irony, sarcasm, exaggeration, parody, ridicule, humour and the like in exposing, denouncing, or deriding the vicious sores of the society and the follies and foibles of the individuals. Three kinds of satirical literature are found-Horatian, Juvenalian and Menippean. Horatian satire castigates the social vices good-humouredly. Juvenalian satire's intention is to severely attack the targets. Mental attitudes come under the scanner of the Menippean satire. Satire has two key kinds of function-one is 'positive' and other 'negative'.

The post-colonial literature is the literature of national allegory. Indian post-colonial writers in English like Rohinton Mistry, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Sashi Tharoor who reflect the post-colonial situations of India in their writings, are concerned with the degrading situation of Indian society which is coming out of the dungheap of the colonial period. Their prolific writings are marked more or less with satirical criticism for the prevalent amorality in the socio-political and cultural spheres of Indian. Actually, they try to establish its identity by clinging to certain values and ideas.

Khushwant Singh entered into the whole corpus of the Indian writing in English with his novels, historical writings, short stories and essays. His writerly career spans over decades with many accolades including Sahitya Academy Award. Among many themes such as contemporary politics, love, lust, religion, history he is chiefly remembered for his erotic and satirical writings. His satirical vision on the contemporary socio-political situations of India gets vivid and candid exposé in his short stories. The short stories are characterised with a sharp moral point of view and constituted with the serious contemplations about life. His attitude is imbued with humanistic vision. He feels for the progress and prosperity of all humanity. He is gravely concerned over the gradual moral decadence of the masses of India, communalism, leaning of the public, either educated or not, on the impostor religious persons, superstitious religious beliefs in astrology, horoscope, numerology, vaastu shastra. He says, "I find the belief in Feng Shui, Vaastu, numerology and other such practices laughable." (*Absolute Khushwant*, 171) He holds up the foils and foibles, ills and evils, and vicious sores of the society and the individuals which torture and torment the greater humanity to ridicule with the intent to rectify them for the general goodness of all humanity. His hatred for the backward-minded public in general and politicians, bureaucratic persons, impostor sandhus and wogs in particular, and his deep concerns over the prevailing socio-political, cultural and religious sores are crystallised in his pungent short stories. He says that "we must also drastically reduce the number of people who wear saffron clothes and call themselves sandhus.

They are parasites who live on working-people's earnings." (*Khushwantnama*, 37) His suppressed anger is rife throughout the stories. The stories are analysed in terms of morality against the backdrop of severe amorality reigning supreme in Indian socio-political milieu. His stories have a positive value. He uses irony, exaggeration, sarcasm, humour and ridicule with irony predominating as the effective tools of satire. His satire is more Horatian than Juvenalian in spirit. He, in most cases, good-humouredly pierces his poisoned knife into his targets. His outward positive speaking is couched with bitter censure or anger within. Below the short stories of Khushwant Singh are analysed in the light of satire.

The Mark of Vishnu is a supreme exemplary ironical and wry-poignant short story about superstitious religious beliefs of the Hindus. The author highlights the irrational ways of maintaining religious rituals through character portrayal of Gangu Ram who represents "all Hindus". Gangu Ram being believer of Vishnu, the preserver of all animals, smears "his forehead with a V mark in sandalwood paste"(19) to show his deep devotion to the deity. To show his deepest faith to it he protects all harmful animals like centipede, wasp, serpent and scorpion. He preserves the most venomous of the serpents, the Kala Nag. He provides every day the Kala Nag with "a saucerful of milk and in the morning he would see the milk is gone" (20). He presumably thinks the Kala Nag must have eaten the milk. The author criticises such religious prejudice making Gangu Ram and his Hindu totem the laughing stock of the young school boys. The youngsters provide judicious answer to the mysterious disappearance of the milk and banter the sheer stupidity of the devout Hindu.

"Perhaps it is the cat' (the cat might end up the milk)

.....
'You're a stupid old Brahmin', I said. 'Don't you know snakes don't drink milk? At least one couldn't drink a saucerful everyday. The teacher told us that a snake eats only once in several days.'" (20)

A deep irony is embedded in the story. Once Gangu Ram says, "As long as I give him milk, he will not bite anyone in this house." But the very Kala Nag fangs his preserver to death. It digs his fang in the "V"

mark proving the unreasonableness of the orthodox superstitious belief. (19)

The short story *The Fawn* is a dig at the modern man who is fond of hunting animals and shows the sham affection to his family members: "Don't you see, one has to quash real hate under a weight of make-believe affection? Now and then one wants to get away from it all." (121) The modern man is sadistic. The narrator's companion wants to kill the beautiful deer with his gun. When he kills a fawn his delight knows no bounds. The tears and the gurgling blood streaming out of the fawn's jugular veins cannot elicit a little bit of sympathy from the narrator's friends. He even joyfully slit the throat of his hunt. Khushwant Singh is against the killing of animal for sport. He said: "Fortunately, in India, hunting of animals has been banned." (*Agnostic khushwant*, 38)

In *Man, How the Government of India Run* Khushwant Singh's stern-mouthed criticism attacks the Indian bureaucracy. Through the portrayal of three government officials namely Sunder Singh, Sambamurthy and Ghosh, the author exposes the interior of the government offices to the public. The government officials like secretaries, additional secretaries, joint secretaries are the great giants who derelict their duties. They do nothing saving attending the meetings. Sunder Singh's comment gives validity to it: "All they do is to attend meetings, drink cups of tea, dictate a few memos and then go home to their memsahibs pretending they are very tired because they have been so busy. Ha! Busy! We know how busy! Don't we?" (128) If the typists and stenographers do not put sense and order the proceedings of the meetings, decisions taken by the big officials will remain completely unintelligible. If they do not put up the necessary papers to the officials the matters will come to a standstill. The author pungently says that the stenographers are among the 30,000 who "poured in and out of the enormous beehives like Govt. Secretaries". (128) The officials from top to bottom do not come to the offices punctually. Their office hours begin by ordering the chaprasi to take tea, coffee and biscuits, by scanning news papers and taking lunch. Putting his signature in the attendance register, Sunder Singh goes out to play volleyball. The bosses

who also leave their offices for lunches seldom return before 3-4 p.m. after having their afternoon siestas. The servile mentality of the low rank officials is expressed through the speech of Sambamurthy:

"Mr. Singh," said Sambamurthy, sipping his coffee. 'As I have said before, the secret of success in government service is very simple. You only have to get on with the man just above you and forget everyone else. It has nothing to do with work or ability or anything like that.'" (137-138) Actually, there is a sense of complete chaos in the Govt. offices which the author unflinchingly pen in this story.

The Great Difference criticises the narrow mindedness of the religion-loving Muslim and the Hindu and their respective superiority complex. It also criticises the unsympathetic and polarised existence of two religions in a same country. These two religions show bitter animosity and nurture zero tolerance against each other. Two eminent representatives of two religions from India-Swami Vasheshwara Nandaji from the Hindu and Maulana Hafiz from the Muslim- went to Paris to attend the world congress to present the superior qualities of their respective religions. On their way they along with the author shared the same railway compartment. The author unobjectionably shared his lunch with the Maulana sahib which Swamiji did not take lightly. When in the evening the Maulana sahib went to the latrine with his copper jug, Swamiji accused the author of sharing meal with Moslem:

Even if you have no religious belief, you should not eat with Moslem. They are outcastes and dirty people. Didn't you see the very jug he carried into the latrine he uses for drinking water? (94)

Another time when Swamiji went to the nearby bush not going to the latrine and finished his bathing on the crowded platform, Maulana sahib belched his severe contempt out to the author, "I wonder when God will teach these Hindus some sense!" (94)

In *My Own My Native Land*, the author flings his satirical shaft at the Government of India and its bureaucratic officers by delineating the convoluted rules of the Customs Houses run by the worthless officers. The irony is itself embedded in

the very title when the author uses "My" twice. At the Customs House, the harassment of the author is maximised. It took an almost whole day from the author to get his goods released safely from the House. And he did this only by bribing an obsequious gentleman Rs-10. He wants to say that all the harassing and negative activities are only possible in his own country. He pathetically sings"

Breathes there a man with soul so dead.

Who never to himself hath said

This is my own native land,' etc.etc.(282)

In *The Rape* the moot point of Khushwanta Singh is that the machinery of judiciary is corrupt and the verdict is purchased by the rich. Bindo, the daughter of Banta Singh, silently consented to her consummation with Dilip Singh. Banta Singh dragged Dilip to the court referring to the sexual intercourse as rape. He bought the lawyer and bribed all the machinery of the judiciary to take the verdict in his favour. The author's comment is rightly contextualised here: "The machinery of justice is fully oiled". (78) On the other hand, Dilip being poor had neither counsel nor defence witnesses. He was saved by Bindo by confessing her willingness to their sexual meeting.

In *India Is A Strange Country*, the author not only criticises the foreigners but the Indians also. He highlights that the foreigners like Babar and the English would dislike India and the Indians alike. Despite that, they resided in India. In his memoir, Babar says that: "Hindustan is a country that has a few pleasures to recommend it; he people are not handsome...They have no genius, no comprehension of mind, no politeness of manner, no kindness of fellow-feeling."(220) The English hated the anglicised Indians as 'wogs'. Tyson stayed in India as long as his pet dog Martha lived, though other English left for their home country. After the death of his pet at the accident he left India. The author expresses his dislike at the scandalous nature of the natives. The natives traduce the reputation of the foreigner in their back but not in front of them.

Butterfly ridicules those anglicised Indians who hate their native culture and fall in honeymoon with the cultures of the adopted alien country. To make themselves appear more close to the western people they change their names, dresses, food,

eating style and behaviour. But these brown sahibs pathetically get insulted and suffer deprivation at the hands of the western people.

The author takes a satirical bent of mind at the anglicised wogs in the pungent *A Bride for the Sahib*. The 'Sahib' in the title is a derogatory term which the author uses intentionally. In it the author refers to an anglicised brown sahib Sunny Sen's marriage with an educated homely traditional girl and the ultimate suicide of the bride. Santosh Sen self-metamorphosed into Sunny Sen is fully accustomed to the westernised life style. In his secret heart he even silently hates the culture of his mother land. He marries an Indian lady only to satisfy his traditional-minded widowed mother. From the very beginning of his marriage he behaves formally with his wife. He adheres to the English life style-omlette, bread, fork, knife and wine, and his wife to the traditional ones-beetle leaf, rice, lentil curry and finger. Mr. Sen silently hates his wife's life style. He thinks the beetle leaf chewing of his wife as the cow's curd chewing. He even feels debased when he thinks that the news of his marriage might be circulated to his westernised friends. He never invites his office colleagues to his home. His behaviour with his wife gets worse from bad. His wife resorts to the ways of death seeing no way to avert this subservient unhappy life.

Through *Karma* the author unearths the hidden irony of the neo-colonised cultural mimicry of the colonised. He severely criticises those Indian wogs who hate the culture of their mother land and make dear the westernised culture. The author here highlights the pathetic plight of a wog like Mr. Mohan Lal. Mr. Mohan Lal adopts the foreign culture. He speaks Oxford English. His garments are made in England. He assiduously follows things which will make him more like the English. He criticises the Indian-made mirror at the first-class waiting room as it is defective and ineffective. The ironical climax of the story comes when Mr. Mohan Lal entrains a first-class compartment and the two English soldiers throw Mr. Lal with his luggage at the flat form reminding him that the compartment is specially booked for the English not for the brown oriental. On the other hand, Lady Lachmi, Mr. Lal's wife, cannot accompany her husband as she is

totally Indian-in dress and food and behaviour. She comfortably journeys in the zenana compartment of the same train. Mr. Lal's wretched condition is aggravated by the cosy condition of his own traditional-minded wife.

The Insurance Agent is a humorous story. The author Ksushwant Singh takes a big hand at the publicity hunting snobbish insurance agent. Swami, the insurance agent, pays press photographers so that his photograph with the V.I.P appears in the papers and his publicity spreads everywhere. The author funnily says that "in fact there was some kind of telepathic contact between Swami and press photographers."(117) He is, as it were, omnipresent. There is no place where he does not figure prominently. He, invited or not, is expected everywhere—"at public receptions, private parties, political gatherings, religious meetings, social gatherings, weddings, christenings and funerals."(114) In parties, he embraces everyone and philosophically talks to them in such a way as he is familiar to them from long before. He talks about the "world being an illusion, the uncertainty of life and the inevitability of death."(117) The utmost intension of the insurance agent in his so doings is, as the author says, to sell insurance policies to the people.

The Bottom Pincher is funny and truculently satirical. The author makes the ironical appearance of the city bottom pinchers like Pesi Lalkaka to the public in this story. Mr. Pesi Lalkaka is a respectable senior gentleman. But he surreptitiously pats and caresses the bottoms of the gentle ladies who are engaged in buying some goods in crowded shops in the peopled places. The narrator alias author bitingly says that "our hero had such an obsession with bosoms and bottoms."(164)

In **Riot** Khushwant Singh denounces the nefarious communalism which is the by-product of religious fanaticism. In the story he refers to a petrifying sombre clash between Moslems and Hindus along with the love-making of the street dogs. During the riot the curfew is slammed. The shops and the doors of the houses are closed from inside. The paralysed silence is broken now and then by the hobnailed boots of the police. Amidst this permeating silence the Moti, the pet dog of Ramaza,

and Rani, Ram Jayan's charity seeking dog, begins love-making in the open street. But the barking of the street dogs prompts Jayan to throw stone at the dogs which unfortunately hits Ramzan. This is enough to create communal violence. The result is that the properties of both sides are destroyed. On the debris the dogs make love with each other. Actually he author mocks at such communal violence and the zero tolerance between the Muslims and the Hindus.

The tongue-in-cheek **The Maharani of Chootiapuram** is a frank and veritable expose of the true mentality of the writers to their fellow writers. Here Khushwant openly criticizes the whole range of the writers who always try to malign the reputation of other writers. He also criticises his self: "Our main targets were fellow writers who had done better than us."(462) Moreover, to attend the book-launching ceremony means to get "Scotch, wine and tasty snacks free of charge."(463) Some goes to the ceremony to get flashed before the camera bulbs for their publicity. He confesses that media plays havoc in publishing a book. A book will remain unnoticed if the publicity hunting writers "do not ply the media with booze and snacks."(462) Rajkumari Rukmini, 'Maharani' in the title, is severely criticised by the author. She is pretentious. She conceals her unwillingness to listen to the boring speeches and readings from the books at the book-launching. But her heart says differently. She actually attends the ceremony solely to show her superiority to the public. As the author says, "She regards herself a very superior person."(464) Her camouflaged self-representation makes her a most hospitable and charitable person. But she is a confirmed miserly one. So, some call her 'Maharani of Chootiapuram'. The author calmly accepts her assessment about all: "But isn't that true of all of us?"(496)

Mr. Kanjoos and the Great Miracle relates to a story of an Indian family and the cheating tendency of its miser members. Mr. Kanjoos and Mrs. Kanjoos accept the invitation of other people. They enjoy the invitation whole-heartedly. But when their turn comes they shyly avoid that. They invite the author to join them in drinks in restaurants. But Mr. Kanjoos dodges paying the bill by showing lame

excuses resting the responsibility of bill-payment on the author.

Kanjooses manage to go with the Indian delegates in an international conference in Germany. There they manoeuvre to enter the international parties held in the reception hall and unabashedly enjoy the meals. Mr.Kanjoos even finishes the wedding of their daughter at the cost of the Indian ambassador. The author put these characters who malign the reputation of the country, on the gallows of satire.

Life's Horoscope rings with humour smeared in sarcasm. The author severely attacks the dowry system, vastu shastra, kamsutra, astrology and horoscope. According to him, all these are sheer nonsense. They have no value in reality. The story deals with Madan Mohan Pandey's superstitious beliefs in horoscopes, vastu shastra and kamsutra. The horoscope of Madan Pandey says he will be a great savant and father of many children. But he in reality cannot teach his students. He earns from his students the title M.M. meaning Maha Moorkh. His marriage is also a failure. He marries Mohini after hair-splitting analysis of the horoscopes of both of them. He also observes all the dictates mentioned in the kamsutra to copulate his wife. But he fails to sexually satisfy his wife. He then thinks the failure comes due to the disorderly arrangements of all the furniture of the house. He arranges the furniture according to the rules maintained in vastu shastra. But he still fails utterly to satisfy sexually his wife.

The voice of God offers the bitter expression of chagrin of the author for the dissembling political leaders, corrupted police and even easy-to-be cheated illiterate rural masses. The author here mentions three political leaders who come to a village, Bhamba to woo vote. Sardar Sahib Ganda Singh who helped government and in return had been granted lands, titles, and an honorary magistracy and who had never trampled the Bhamba, come had to woo vote being accompanied with Mr. Forsythe. The author daringly exposes Granda Singh. Granda Singh shelters the ruffians, bribes the police and carry on lootings recklessly. He even oils the Excise staff with food and drink and runs the illegal liquor shops in broad daylight. Another candidate Sardar Kartar Singh dressed in

Gandhian cap, shirts and dhoti of coarse handspun clothes in place of his European black coat, tie and trousers, came to Bhamba for vote campaign for the first time in his life. The author funnily said that even the villagers found it difficult to recognise him. With him was accompanied Seth Sukhtanker who was elected unopposed to the Punjab Assembly was a millionaire, owning a chain of cloth mills. When the people were clothless and foodless he stacked wheat and clothes to sell at fabulous prices. The third candidate Baba Ram Singh who frequented the village and most favoured and revered in it had to lose his property to the Government and suffered many jail terms for his fights of the poor villagers against the exploiting foreigners, blood-sucking landlords, police-bullying and corrupt administration. The author did not respite the illiterate villagers from his criticism. On the day of voting, the villagers being booze with the wine supplied by Gandar Sing landed huge support to the deceptive candidates. They were not bountiful on Baba Ram Singh. The author also attacked heavily-handedly the police and the village lambardara for exploiting the innocent villagers.

Humour and irony is the soul of the story *Zora Singh*. The author pierces his ironical knife into the corrupt hearts. He tersely criticises the bureaucratic humbugs and the deceptive ministers. There is big gap between their words and works. What they say publicly is not what they actually want. Khushwant Singh mentions two such depraved persons-one Zora Singh, chief executive engineer of PWD and other a minister. Zora passes the shoddy construction works of a Government project undertaken by a contractor in lieu of huge bribes from the contractor. The author says tauntingly: "What Zora took were not bribes but his commission, as did all his Indian subordinates, without compromising on the quality of the work. This was not regarded as corruption."(380) Zora is out and out a deceptive figure and honeyed tongue. He beds the wives of his office workers. But in the wedding ceremony he makes the bridegroom read the oath, "...you, my daughter, will look upon all men besides your husband as your brothers".(375) The author ridicule Zora: "The country needs a man like you at the helm to march towards

prosperity.”(386) When Zora is made the member of Rajya Sabha the author derogatively says: “Builder of buildings becomes builder of the nation.”(388) Khushwant Singh criticises a minister who possesses the most voluptuous mentality. When he was the Health Minister in Orissa he wanted either nurses or lady doctors; when the Education Minister of the centre the lady teachers and when ministers at the department of public works the young women.

In *The Mulberry Tree*, Khushwant Singh fumes his venomous anger at the ignorance and religious superstitions of the Indians. He refers to the incidence of drinking of milk by Ganapati. Vijay Lal, the mouthpiece of the author, delineates how the middle class Indians educated or not, line up to feed the milk to the Ganapati. He is amazed to know that “stone and metal idols [are] drinking milk.” (450) Knowing from Hakim Tara Chand that Shreeswamy invoked Ganapati to accept offerings of milk, Vijay sarcastically remarks: “Shreeswamy that crook who has a dozen criminal cases pending against him and has been jailed a few times?”(451) Vijay was so irate with the current scenario he told the paanwala’ “Lalaji, your gods are moody. I have a stone Ganapati outside my flat. I put a cup of milk to his tusk and his trunk but did not drink a drop.” (453) He hears one of the three saffron-clad young men standing in the queue to comment, “This is what makes India great.”(454) Then Vijay loudly and angrily blared out that all the countries like Greece and Rome flourished as the past and only India remained buried under the debris of ignorance and superstitions. He sarcastically yelled back at those young men, “You are a bunch of chootiyas. You make India a laughing stock of the world!” (454) The author says that only legitimate place of worship is the home. The author severely criticises religious superstition, astrology, horoscope, numerology and other such methods of forecasting the future topping the list.

The author Khushwant Singh is pained at heart for his country’s gradual degradation and degeneration. His short stories are the epitomes of his anger. His stories representing a chunk of genuine India anatomise the ill-ridden India and its diseased society which is lagging behind other countries. The vitriolic critical scythe of the stories

comes thundering down on the progress-crippling social evils and its corrupted powers. He relentlessly exposes the unscrupulously corrupted politicians, duty-neglected bureaucratic persons, impostor religious persons, anglicised brown sahibs and ignorant and illiterate Indians, and unleashes an opprobrious attack on them to give them opportunity to be morally corrected on their own. He wields his satirical weapons against utter ignorance, sheer folly, sycophancy, hypocrisy, bureaucratic corruption, and superstitious beliefs in horoscope, numerology, astrology, vaastu shastra and kamsutra for complete banishment of these afflicting aspects from the society.

The stinging vitriol in the stories is not devoid of humorous laughter. Actually, his satire often combines anger and humour. His humour is very lethal. It has purgatory value. He wishes to teach us morality by amusing and abusing us. He wants to reconstruct by deconstructing the contemporary prevailing socio-political and cultural things which he considers a bane to the society on its advancement. Through the short stories Khushwant Singh expresses his moral philosophy which bitingly censures the resistant forces and which is concerned with the progress and prosperity of the country and the well-being of all humanity. His intention is to blossom a lotus out of the present muddy humanity. He presents through the satiric fibres of the stories his futuristic vision of a better society. To conclude, the crux of the stories is to serve a message which is in the words of the author Khushwant Singh: “inform, amuse and provoke.”

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