

**KUSHWANTH SINGH: AMULTIFACETED PERSONALITY****SK. KHAMAR JAHAN¹, Dr. S. PRAKASH RAO²**¹Research Scholar, J N T U H, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India²Professor, PMV D and PG College, Osmania University, A P, India**SK. KHAMAR JAHAN****ABSTRACT**

The most widely read post-colonial writer in the English language, an accomplished historical novelist, outstanding journalist, prominent columnist, political commentator and a social critic, Kushwanth Singh, needs no introduction. He enjoys a prominent place not only in Indian contemporary literature but also in journalism as he rendered most of his fruitful years as an editor to different newspapers like *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *The National Herald* and *The Hindustan Times*. His witty and humorous writings are widely read till date. He has an average of hundred fiction, non-fiction, historical novels, short stories and joke books to his credit. At the ripe age of 98, he comes out with another book *Khushwantnama: The Lessons of MyLife*. The main objective of this article is to honour him as a multifaceted personality and an accomplished writer with a brief discussion on his most popular select writings.

Key Words: authentic writer, partition novels, historian, multifaceted

Article Info:

Article Received:19/11/2013

Revised on:01/12/2013

Accepted for Publication:6/12/2013

Kushwanth Singh acquires an iconic status as one of the finest historians and novelists in Indian literary history. His vast oeuvre includes fiction, historical novels, translations, joke books, books on Delhi, women, nature and current affairs. He has been founder-editor of *Yojna*, and editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *The National Herald* and *The Hindustan Times*. He has spent time in a number of other professions, including law, diplomacy, radio broadcasting and teaching. He is admired and lambasted in equal measure because of his irreverent and controversial views. His biggest attribute is that he speaks his mind, straight forward and ever lastingly impressive. He is eminently readable and his literary reputation is legendary. Khushwant Singh was a Member of Parliament from 1980 to 1986. He was awarded the

Padma Bhushan in 1974, but returned the decoration in 1984 in protest against the storming of the Golden Temple by the Indian Army.

Born on Feb. 2, 1915 at a village Hadali in Khushab district Sargodha, Punjab - now in Pakistan, Kushwanth Singh was highly influenced by the place. His parents, Lady Varyam Kaur and Sir Sobha Singh migrated to Delhi leaving him behind in Hadali in his parental grandmother's care. After passing his matriculation in 1930 he joined St. Stephen's College in Delhi run by the Cambridge Mission, regarded as one of the best colleges in India. Though academically he was poor, Singh was probably instigated towards his literary aspirations during this time. The Bible classes interested him immensely because he loved the sonorous language of the Old

and the New Testaments of The Bible. He set off for England in 1934 as he planned to qualify for the Bar. He returned home in 1939 with the outbreak of the Second World War, started his career as a practicing lawyer and married his lady love, kaval. He left Pakistan after 1947 as violence had broken out. As he did not make any virtual progress as a lawyer, he applied for a job in the Ministry of External Affairs. He was appointed as an information officer in the High Commission in London. From there he was transferred to Ottawa, Canada where he met different journalists like: Kingsley Martin, Harold Evans, William Clarke, David Astor; writers like: C.P. Snow, Prof. C.E.M. Joad; and poets: Auden, Louis MacNeice, Dylan Thomas; all frequented his place.

In the summer 1951, he began living all alone in the house and worked every morning on his first novel based upon the Partition of India, completed the rough draft of *Mano Majra (Train to Pakistan)* in three months. He took a job with All India Radio and became the in charge of the English overseas programmer. Here he met eminent writers like Nirad C. Chaudhari and Ruth Pawar Jhabalvala. Singh accepted an offer to take over as the deputy head of The Mass Communication Division of UNESCO in Paris. There he spent most of his time in writing letters and attending various conferences and receptions in different parts of the world like Madrid, Geneva and London. He returned to India and took up a job as the chief editor of *Yojana*, a weekly publication (in both Hindi and English) brought out by the Planning Commission of India. He was asked by the Encyclopedia Britannica to write on Sikhs and their history. He delivered a series of lectures on Sikhism at the Spalding Trust of Oxford and taught Comparative Religion at Princeton University. Simultaneously several of his short stories and articles appeared in American, British, and Indian journals like *The New York Times* and *The Observer* (London). After a short period at Princeton and Hawaii, Singh began to teach Indian Religious and Contemporary Indian Politics at Swarthmore College and these teachings were published under the title *Vision of India*. Though he was not so successful as a lawyer, his journey as an administrator, writer, teacher, journalist and an

editor made him a multifaceted personality and brought him undiminished fame in the respective circles.

In 1969 Khushwant Singh reached Bombay to join *The Illustrated Weekly* as an editor. He also edited Indira Gandhi's *National Herald* and took up the editorship of *New Delhi*, a fortnight magazine launched by the Ananda Bazaar Group of Publications. He was offered the choice of becoming either the High Commissioner in London, or a member of the Rajya Sabha as well as the editor of *The Hindustan Times* and he chose the latter. In 1980 he became a member of the Parliament and, also the editor of the largest circulating newspaper of Delhi. Singh continued writing his weekly column "*With Malice towards One and All*" that enjoys a faithful readership to this day.

P.P. Mehta remarks that his "achievement in the field of novels is no doubt significant but his short stories are superbly chiseled artistic pieces". *The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories* is the first book written in 1950 comprises mostly ironic tales about faith and religion. This selection includes ten of his best, bearing testimony to the author's remarkable range and his ability to create unforgettable characters out of everyday lives. It conveys with a fatality, the foolishness of stubborn beliefs. Khushwant Singh has mostly written about what he is personally acquainted with, his personal experiences, close association and intimate knowledge about the subject taken up, and always comes through in all his fiction. His first collection of short stories was the result of his briefless days as a lawyer in Lahore. Almost all of them are based on real life experiences or those related by friends with the autobiographical elements of his school days. Ultimately he concludes the fact that a man's superstitious beliefs leads to his doom.

Khushwant Singh's profound knowledge and vast understanding of India's history, political systems, and literary heritage is reflected in his prose works. His novels are deeply rooted in the recent history and political situation of contemporary India. *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Khushwant Singh's first novel brought him instant

fame, is considered as one of the most compelling accounts of the Partition of India in 1947. *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1961), his second novel, deals with the conflict in a prosperous Sikh family living in Punjab in the mid-1940s between a magistrate father who works for the British and the son dreams of becoming the leader of a terrorist group rebelling against foreign rule. *Delhi* (1990), a picaresque history of India's capital extending over six hundred years narrated by a eunuch has intervened the historical perspective. His book, "*A History of Sikhs*" is a classic well researched two-volume book on Sikh History.

Train to Pakistan (1956) is a magnificent novel where Khushwant Singh tells the tragic tale of the most lethal incident in the history of India that left an indelible mark on the psyche of every Indian. The brutality, inhumanity and genocide and the events that followed with human history are breath taking. During the partition of India thousands fled from both sides of the border seeking refuge and security. The natives were uprooted with a ghastly experience to give up their belongings, their identity and rush to a land where they are alienated. Partition touched the whole country and Singh attempts in this novel to depict the trauma of the victims of partition. He could easily understand the pain of the people as he belongs to the community who were victimized. *Mano Majra*, the maiden name of the novel, was an imaginative peaceful abode of communal harmony that witnessed a dark history of hatred and religious segregation. *Mano Majra* is a microcosmic representation of the incredible suffering and bewilderment of the people of the country. He encounters the tragedy of the partition through his characters and records the inner turmoil and social complexes that plagued the nation and explore the gruesome human disaster in the wake of partition that divided the heart and soul of the people. "The fact is, both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped. From Calcutta, the riots spread north and east and west: to Noakhali in East Bengal, where Muslims massacred Hindus; to Bihar, where Hindus massacred Muslims. Mullahs roamed Punjab and the Frontier Province with boxes of

human skulls said to be those of Muslims killed in Bihar". (p.3)

In *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh brings out the unobserved, unnoticed and ignored voices through his characters from three religious communities: Hindu, Sikh and Muslim. He doesn't blame anyone but emphasizes the agonizing tale of the people who got caught in the tempest of partition. "I am sure no one in *Mano Majra* even knows that the British have left and the country is divided into Pakistan and Hindustan. Some of them know about Gandhi but I doubt if anyone has ever heard of Jinnah" (p. 21). The story begins with a vivid description of how the village, *Mano Majra* was like a peaceful and harmonious place until the seeds of hatred and suspicion grew. Ram Lal, the village money lender is killed dramatically by a neighboring village's dacoit, Malli Juggut Singh portrayed as local badmaash of the village who loves Nooran, the only daughter of a blind mulla of the village, is arrested as murder suspect by the police. Suddenly Iqbal, a social reformer who wants to mobilize support for the socialist party of India enters the village. The western educated Iqbal does not push the plot forward yet utter all those philosophical statements which are in fact the author's own beliefs. "There is no crime in anyone's blood any more than there is goodness in the blood of others. Criminals are not born. They are made by hunger, want and injustice" (p.39). The author brings in the characters like Hukum Chand, the Deputy Commissioner and the sub inspector in great detail to show how efforts were made to create tension between the Sikhs and the Muslims in *Mano Majra*. He narrates the incidents and creates the characters in excruciating manner and captures the transition of behaviour and attitude life like. The character of Hukum Chand poses the moral dilemmas and conflicting thoughts instead of focusing on the political events. Through the characters' relationships allows us to get close to a social, cultural and political understanding of the time.

Mano Majra turns into a battlefield when the horrifying train with brutally mutilated corpses enters the village. The Muslim villagers in *Mano*

Majra are forced by the government to leave everything to get across the border for safety. Trains back and forth arrive packed full of dead bodies only to fuel more retaliation for the conflict. When their Muslim friends are forcibly evacuated, the villagers of conflicting loyalties know that the fabric of their lives is changed forever. The author weaves a heart-wrenching climax where the brave Juggasaves the train full of Muslims including his pregnant girlfriend, Nooran, that is about to be derailed before reaching to safety across the border to Pakistan. In 1998 a movie based on this novel with same title *Train to Pakistan* was directed by Pamela Rooks and was nominated in Cinequest Film Festival, 1999 in the best feature film category.

I shall not hear the nightingale (1959), Khushwant Singh's second novel, is the story of a relatively important Indian Sikh family reflecting the love, pride, passion, religion and culture of the country. It is set in the pre-war conditions in 1942-43, when India was about to get its freedom from the British government. It gives an improved perspective of history with the story of common civilians than the perspective of history as a chain of important events in chronological order. Khushwant Singh develops its characters to provide meaningful insights into the life and thoughts of people of bygone years under uncommon circumstances. The language of the novel is beautiful mix of simple and standard imagery. *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* is a deep insight made into the human psyche that faced the trials and tribulations of social dynamics at a time in the past. It gives the reader a window into the world of a Sikh family caught up in changing times and the turmoil they endure. The locale Amritsar serves as a pivot on which the entire structure of the novel is constructed.

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale is widely acclaimed as one of Khushwant Singh's finest novel ever. Like *Train to Pakistan*, this book also explores a painful history of India with an unflinching eye. This book is a towering achievement in storytelling as it revolves round several adequately sketched characters and compulsively readable. Khushwant Singh tactically populates his single story with certain cohesion between threads of many sub plots. This

book explores a despicable side of India's history of servile Indian government servants in the British regime. Buta Singh's character typifies those Indians awaiting the slightest nod of approval from the British Raj and would degrade themselves to be in their good looks.

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale is a unique look at the relationship of the British masters with those Indians like Buta Singh who were loyal to them. When that relationship unravels it brings in a heartbreaking devastation. Buta Singh, the District Magistrate, continues the distinguished line of his father and grandfather as a very obedient servant of the British Government. He doesn't miss any chance in showing his loyalty to the British and is also proud of it. He is the proverbial civil servant whose loyalty is unshakable and he believes that the British should continue in India. He has high political ambitions and his ideological stand is fickle. He wishes to keep up his ancestral tradition of unflinching loyalty to the British but not without a selfish ulterior motive. His character in the novel gives a panoramic view of contemporary life.

Khushwant Singh places a young Sher Singh as his protagonist and set him against his own father, Buta Singh, a chip of the old block. The ideological conflict between father and son is domesticated through the interface between the highly religious mother, Sabhrai and the recalcitrant family members. Sher Singh opposes the British rule and wants to oust them from India. "We should sprinkle blood on our guns and say a short prayer to baptize them. Then they will never miss their mark and we can kill as many Englishmen as we like" (p.165). He tries hard to fit into a life of his own, to please his sexually demanding wife, Champak and to dream beyond his father's security, but alas. He forms a revolutionary group of young boys, whose bravado does not pitifully match their wisdom with the objective of revolting against Britishers. For namesake, he is accepted as a leader of a group of local disbanded terrorists, but he is averse to violence. He is well aware of his growing paunch and his unattractive psyche.

Even though her Singh is the leader, Madan, son of local magistrate Wazir Chand is the backbone of the group. He is an interesting character, Sher Singh's friend and comrade against the British. MadanLal is the cricket star of the college and a local hero as he played for his province and won against a visiting English side. He has brought the other boys with him and would have been the leader of the band except that he knew little of politics. Kushwanth Singh portrays him as a swashbuckling Casanova who has both Champak and Sher Singh's sister *Been* lusting for him, while his own wife remains away mysteriously. Sher Singh arranges the smuggling of rifles and hand grenades from across the frontier. Madan is both Sher Singh's chief supporter and rival. MadanLal also supports the plan of killing either a deer or a duck and finds a Sarus crane with its mate. Sher Singh is unwilling to shoot the crane since he believed that 'if one of a pair is killed, the other dies of grief' (168).

Madanequally friendly and adverse seesSherSingh beyond his persona, adding his father's frustrations of serving Buta Singh. The Deputy Commissioner John Taylor learns about their misadventures and waits for chance to take action. The turning point of the story comes when Sher Singh is arrested by police in his revolutionary activities and murder of Jhimma Singh. The ideal of patriotism is reduced to a sordid murder which Sher Singh commits to save himself. Khuswant Singh handles the emotional dilemmas of his characters, and how they react differently to the same circumstances, and was faced with a dilemma to save him and his father's hard earned reputation, or to save his revolutionary friends. He has neither the strength nor the manhood to cope with the 'conflictingemotions of guilt and pride' (174).The taut narration keeps us guessing till the end of the novel. Dyer the dog is a symbolic representation of the dumb and mute anger of the Indian masses and Sabhrai's character is a revelation at the end. Sabhrai embodies the Indian culture of her time trying to save her family from falling apart. The ending of the novel is dominated by the mother Sabhrai as the Virtue of her moral goodness and deep faith in her religion she becomes the towering figure of the novel. "Sabhrai was possessed of that

sixth sense which often goes with people of deep religious convictions. It has been proved so often that her family believed that she had some sort of intuition which told her of events to come" (264).

Khushwant Singh claims it took him almost twenty years to complete the novel *Delhi* and dedicated it to his son Rahul Singh and NilouferBillimoria. Kushwanth Singh depicts *Delhi* with rich layers of history unfolding through the characters he chooses at the given time to open the grandeur and the grime of the city. "I return to Delhi as I return to my mistress Bhagmati when I have had fill of whoring in foreign lands"(365).He doesn't follow plain historical catalogue of Delhi, but adds his wit, sarcasm, humor and also erotic description to the book. The novel *Delhi* written by Khushwant Singh is a story that spills both the grandeur and squalor of the city unfolding through a perverse romance. Delhi, the capital of India, was completely destructed and then reconstructed number of times as it turned to be a city of culture, calamity, conceit, capability, poets, saints and politicians. His protagonist is not any handsome rich dude but a bawdy, old, reprobate Sikh journalist, in love-hate relationship with a hermaphrodite, Bhagmatia and the city. The narrator discovers the legends that lurk in various streets, forts, abandoned palaces, towers, temples, embankments, mosques, gurudwar as, memorials, burial grounds and coffee houses of the city. He doesn't relate the history of Delhi in a mundane manner but beautifully through his characters of those times making the book widely readable.

The narrator guides his acquaintances through the ruins of the past that lay strewn all over the historic city tombs, memorials, Durgahs and monuments. The story begins with one of the Mughal emperors, Ghias Uddin Balban and spans from six to seven hundred years and ends with the assassination of Indira Gandhi, leading to the massacre of Sikhs. All episodes of the past are interspersed with a continuous thread of the present being the story of the narrator himself a commoner, an unscrupulous tour guide working in the embassy and indulging his libido in everybody beginning from a local *Hijda* up to his foreign

tourists. The narrator loves his city for what it has endured and the prevailing condition of the city. Delhi celebrates the city of its state, its being, its glory, its mystique and its cosmopolitanism. As the author-narrator undertakes an epic journey in time, he comes across many people who witnessed major historical upheavals throwing light on their personal lives and the times they lived. The Muslim conquest of India had profound impact on its social, cultural, religious, economic and political life. The invaders coming to India had always tried to demonstrate their superiority by destroying places of worship that belonged to a religion other than their own. The chapter, *The Untouchables* brings to light considerable erudition of Sikkim in an authentic manner. The narrator is Jaita Rangreta, an untouchable, who lived in Rikabganj. Everyone looked down upon his entire community, so they attached themselves to the feet of the Guru and began calling themselves the Sikhs of Guru Nanak. This book has a tint of autobiographical note and it moves backwards and forwards in time through the history of Delhi.

Kushwanth Singh's love for Delhi is clearly evident in his narration and he renders a painful tone when he describes how the city had suffered at the hands of people who lusted for dominance over it. He brilliantly depicts pieces of stories that figure out rich history and culture of Delhi including that of Nadir Shah, Taimur, Aurangzeb, MirTaqi Mir and Bahadur Shah Zafar. There are stories of the rulers, destroyers and the kings who looted and exploited Delhi. There are some imaginary characters like Musaddi Lal Kayasth, a Hindu convert working under the hostile GhiyasUd din Balban to win the affections of his wife. The war of 1857 is described by a Sikh Nihal Singh fighting for the British against the forces of Bahadur Shah Zafar to revenge the slaying of his Guru by Aurangzeb. The book covers history of Mughals right from the dawn to the dusk of the Mughal Empire. The novel ends with the terror of the Sikhs mercilessly burnt alive by people angered due to the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh guards.

Kushwanth Singh thinks ahead of his time and is totally irreverent and liberal with his writings.

He has a unique ability to reach out even to ordinary readers and acknowledge them on contemporary issues. This South Asia's most read novelist generates controversies and comments daringly on issues. In July 2000, he was conferred the "Honest Man of the Year Award" by the Sulabh International Social Service Organization for his courage and honesty in his "brilliant incisive writing". He was awarded the Padma Vibhushan in 2007. His multifaceted personality has made him a cult figure not only in national but international scenario.

REFERENCES

- Singh, Kushwanth. *The Collected Novels*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999.
- Wrenn, C. I. *The English Language: A study by P P Mehta and P N Bhatt*. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 2012.
- Dhawan, R.K. *Three Contemporary Novelists*. New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 1985.
- Singh, Rohini. *Man Called Khushwant Singh*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers Distributors (P)Limited, 2002.
- Bhalla, Alok. *Partition Dialogues: Memories of a Lost Home*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Beniwal, Anup. *"Approximating History": Representing Partition, History, Violence and Narration*. Delhi: Shakti, 2005.
- Ayub, Mohammad. *"Portrayal of Partition by Bapsi Sidhwa and Khushwant Singh: A Comparative Study"*. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences (PJSS)* Vol. 32, No.1 (2012): p 209-220. Print.