



Khushwant Singh as a Historical Novelist

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Abstract

Historical fiction is a genre in which the plot is set amidst historical events or more generally, in which the author uses real events but adds one or more fictional characters or events, or changes the sequence of historical events. Historical fiction may, centre on historical or on fictional characters, but usually represents an honest attempt based on considerable research to tell a story set in the historical past as understood by the author's contemporaries. Those historical settings may not stand up to the enhanced knowledge of later historians.

Khushwant Singh's name is bound to go down in Indian literary history as one of the finest historians and novelists, a forthright political commentator, and an outstanding observer and social critic. His vast and profound knowledge and understanding of India's history, political systems and literary heritage is reflected in his prose works. His novels, which are deeply rooted in the recent history and political situation of contemporary India, include *Train to Pakistan* (1956), one of the most compelling accounts of the Partition of India in 1947; *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1961); and *Delhi* (1990), a picaresque history of India's capital narrated by a eunuch. The researcher has chosen his three novels for its historical perspective. *Train to Pakistan* brilliantly depicts the religious animosity caused during the partition. Khushwant Singh throws light on the Indian bureaucracy of the time. He criticizes both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists and establishes that a man is basically animal in a frenzied mob. *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* has its roots in the freedom movement of the 1942-43. In this novel, he presents the colonial encounter between the Indians and British



Government against the background of a Punjabi family. Khushwant Singh gives a vivid picture of distinctive geographical features as well as its military history and Sikh religion. In *Delhi*, he depicts history of the eternal capital city of India Delhi, which is also the main theme of the novel. Various critics view it as a detective travesty of history. Thus Khushwant Singh is a great historical novelist.

Key-Words : Historicism, Partition, Movement, Hinduism, Sikhism, Muslims, Chaos, Killings.

Introduction:

Historical fiction is a genre in which the plot is set amidst historical events or more generally, in which the author uses real events but adds one or more fictional characters or events, or changes the sequence of historical events. Historical fiction may, centre on historical or on fictional characters, but usually represents an honest attempt based on considerable research to tell a story set in the historical past as understood by the author's contemporaries. Those historical settings may not stand up to the enhanced knowledge of later historians.

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Historical Elements in *Train to Pakistan*:-

Khushwant Singh's magnum opus *Train to Pakistan* is a historical novel. It centres on the theme of the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. It also brilliantly depicts the religious animosity caused during the partition. This partition generated an atmosphere of hate, violence and bitterness between Sikhs and Muslims. Khushwant Singh has depicted Sikh-Muslim antagonism at its climax with the division of Punjab. As Vasant A. Shahane rightly points out :

"Khushwant Singh's art and mind are permeated by a genuine consciousness... His *Mano Majra* is a novel centering on a Punjab village and his real experiences provide him with the necessary setting and understanding of men and situations in rural India."¹

The novel *Train to Pakistan* grows out of a chronological sequence of time with synthesis of reality on a particular historical context –In the context and value of partition of India . It expresses the creativity as to how the movement of trains, signaling time for action, rest and sleep, becomes a symbol of despair, darkness and destruction. Khushwant Singh throws light on the Indian bureaucracy of the time. Through Hukum Chand, he shows how he was caught between hatred and corrupt politicians. Cowasjee writes in this connection:

“Through the portrayal of Hukum Chand, Khushwant Singh shows how the much maligned Indian bureaucracy was itself caught in the hatred of people and the bungling of politicians.”²

The novel portrays the picture of the prevailing atmosphere of hatred and newly generated distrust between Hindus and Muslims at the time of Partition. To depict this hatred, Khushwant Singh criticizes both Hindu and Muslim fundamentalists and establishes that a man is basically animal in a frenzied mob; he writes:

"Mullahs roamed the Punjab and the Frontier Provinces with boxes of human skulls said to be those of Muslims in Bihar"³.

He does not spare Hindus and Sikhs alike for their role in violence scene; he narrates the story of our Sikh Sardars on a killing spree in a jeep alongside the column of mile long Muslim refugees on foot and writes,



"Without warning they opened fire with their Stan guns. God alone knows how many they killed..."⁴

Commenting on this novel Sharma and Johari opine:

"Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* pictures the brutal, realistic story of political hatred and of mass passion during the tragic days that preceded and followed the partition of India. Trains were halted and the unfortunate passengers were ruthlessly butchered. Men, women and children were indiscriminate victims of mad communal frenzy: they were molested and killed by armed bands of men. The novel depicts the fateful journey of one such train vividly and powerfully."⁵

Train to Pakistan is not only a depiction of violence, pain, agony and trauma of partition but also has the strength of narrative technique interspersed with trauma, sex, humour, bribery, hypocrisy, drunkenness, unfair police and bureaucratic functioning, etc.

Parmod Kapoor writes in the introductory section of the special edition of *Train to Pakistan*, published to commemorate sixty years of Indian independence, as :

"... an exercise in perpetuating the memory of those who perished and a recurrence of this tragic chapter in our history."⁶

The narration of Jagga's romance with Nooran is described at length which titillates the common reader and adds to over all development of this novel as a classic, because it provides an ideal back drop of every day life of a common man:

"Jagga Singh's caresses became lustful. His hand strayed from the girl's face to her breasts and her waist. She caught it and put it back on her face. His breathing became slow and sensuous. His hand wandered again and brushed against her breast: as if by mistake"⁷

Khushwant Singh portrayed holocaust, hatred, agony and trauma of the whole country at the time of partition of 1947. The peaceful life in Mano Majra comes to a jolt when on an August night the village money-lender's house is



raided by Malli, a dreaded dacoit. The dacoits drop bangles in the house of Juggut Singh. Later Juggut Singh is arrested as the suspect of the murderer and dacoity. People's Party of India sends its representative Iqbal Singh to work for peace when there are communal disturbances there. Police also arrests him as a suspect in money-lender's murder case. The situation at Mano Majra aggravates further. A commotion is created with the arrival of the ghost train from Pakistan. This engulfs Mano Majra. Madness takes over the people of different communities. It follows senseless killing, looting, burning and raping. The partition of India caused a great deal of turmoil to Khushwant Singh and the result was his incomparable masterpiece, *Train to Pakistan*. Since he was a witness to the violence that occurred, he gives a graphic description of the communal riots.

Historical Elements in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*:

While *Train to Pakistan* has partition as its central theme, *I shall Not Hear the Nightingale* has its roots in the freedom movement of the 1942-43. In this novel Khushwant Singh presents the colonial encounter between the Indians and British Government against the background of Punjabi family. The conflict between the colonizer and the colonized happens to be a major thematic concern in many Indian English novels like R.K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Malgaonkar's *A Bend in the Ganges*, Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* and Khushwant Singh's *I shall not Hear the Nightingale*. In this novel, the novelist presents the colonial encounter. Punjab, the land of five rivers is known for its own distinctive geographical features, its military history and Sikh religion which easily set it off from the other ethnic cultures of India, although it belongs to India politically. Khushwant Singh has tried to give a very microscopic picture of the Punjabi life in the novel even when he concentrates his attention on the political theme.

The character in *I shall Not Hear the Nightingale* can be broadly classified into two groups: one, Sardar Buta Singh, Wazir Chand, John Taylor and Lambardar are pro-British in their attitude; two, Sher Singh, Madan and other



student leaders are anti-British in their attitude. The central irony in the novel is evident in the fact that both the pro-British and the anti-British ideologies are cherished by different members of the same family. Buta Singh, for example, happens to be a District Magistrate who has a great admiration for the British rule in India:

"Loyalty to the Raj had been as much an article of faith with him as it had been with his father and grandfather who had served in the army. He, like them, had mentioned the English king or queen in his evening prayer, 'O, Guru, bless our Sovereign and bless us their subjects so that we remain contented and happy.'"⁸

Buta Singh's son Sher Singh believes in a diametrically opposite philosophy of life. A young and energetic student in the local college, he heads the students Union as its President. He is not very serious about his studies, but he is fired by the patriotic zeal and nationalistic philosophy popularized by Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru and other leaders. He questions the very rationale of the British rule in India and pleads for self-government for the motherland. He is not influenced by his father's loyalty to the British. He enjoys the support of a large mass of students and consequently conducts several secret meetings of students thereby planning to carry out terrorist activities in the city of Amritsar.

Apart from the depiction of Buta Singh's admiration for the British rule, Sher Singh's antipathy for the same and Sabhrai's religious nature, Khushwant Singh offers a very realistic picture of Champak's sexuality, like her shaving of public hair, Mundoo's juvenile curiosity about feminine nakedness, Shunno's anal bleeding and her sexual surrender to the Peer Sahib, Madan's shameless womanization, etc. without any hypocritical slurring over them. In this sense, Khushwant Singh can be easily compared to Mulk Raj anand, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong's and other common-wealth novelists.

The novel, *I shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, like *Train to Pakistan* is not merely a record of real theme, real characters and real incidents but is more than that, it is creative rendering of the real. In this novel, a deep insight is made in



the human psyche that faced trials and tribulations during that period. Hydn More Williams describes rightly :

"Khushwant Singh followed it up (Train to Pakistan) with a novel that deals with the lure of violence and the paradox of heroism. *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* centers on a middle class Sikh family in the Punjab during World War II... The new novel was a complex and disturbing study of adolescent psychology."⁹

Sikhism is interwoven in the plot of *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* and is reflected in the character of Sabhrai. Rosanne Archer, while pointing to some feelings of the novelists, said, "... the book is saved somewhat, however, by an easy style and by the charm and interest of its picture of Punjab land and the Sikh people" (Saturday review Dec. 12, 1959).

Thus the novelist portrays the nationalist movement of 1942, picturesque beauty of Amritsar, and customs of Sikhism. The novelist rightly chooses the locale Amritsar to bring out the various features of Sikhism. The present novel has a great historical appeal.

Historical Elements in Delhi:

Delhi is his third historical, produced it after a long period of his second novel, *I shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. The masterpiece *Delhi* a novel is corollary to his earlier novels. He takes more than twenty-five years to complete and publish this in 1990. He writes his earlier two novels with historical background of aftermath Indian Independence and freedom movement respectively. However, unlike in *Delhi*, he writes his earlier novels in narrow range of historical facts on a smaller scale, the canvas is not as big as it is in *Delhi*. It depicts history of the eternal capital city of India Delhi, which is also the history of India, which is the main theme of the novel.

This novel is a queer blend of history, romance and sex. The chapters of the novel contain the vivid picturization of history commencing from Mugal period of Zahiruddin Babar and ending to the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The novel sometimes appears to be a fine travelogue when Khushwant Singh presents vivid pictures of various roads, lanes and historical places of Delhi in its real



names, forms and features. The historical events narrated in the different chapters of the novel are seen nicely wrapped with sex and romances. The narrator's being himself the novelists, sexually encounters with the Bhagmati, a 'hijra' (hermaphrodite), creates a sinister feeling among the readers. O.P. Mathur writes the opinion of Michael Zeraffa to tell how history and society intermingle in the novel:

"With the novel, society enters into history and history enters into society. The words can be applied to *Delhi*."¹⁰

Displaying his trademark gift of literal humour and a professional historian's control over narration, the writer takes turn, chapter by chapter, on the history of the great city and his own sexual exploits and misadventures with vilaity mems and lonely army wives whom he is supposed to show, Delhi, other eccentric journalists, editors and bureaucrats, a half-mad Sikh ex-army driver, a fanatic gurudwara bhajji, among many other colorful characters. The narrator tells us in a most interesting manner all that Delhi has been to Nadir Shah, Timuar and Aurangzeb, etc. who plundered and destroyed her, and to Meer Taqi Meer and Bahadur Shah Zafar whom Delhi destroyed. Apart from it, Musaddi Lal, Nihal Singh and Jaita Rangretta are common personages of the society who make rational assessment of social and political situation of the time. S.K. Dubey writes about Musaddi Lal as,

"To me it appears that Singh through Musaddi Lal has worked on a popular suspicion which often equates Kayasthas with Muslims. This particular community has lined largely on earning through their brain and pen. Musaddi Lal records the same after he faces humiliation on his having a Muslim name."¹¹

Moreover, we find a vivid narration of Nihal Singh, a Sikh mercenary who settles his historical score with the Mughals by helping the British in crushing the sepyo Muting of 1857- the sunset of the Mughal empire. Meer Taqi Meer represents equally both the history and society of the city of that time. He is a great Urdu poet during the time. His name is as Taqvi or Taqi. Meer refers to the



rulers, benefactors, Urdu poets, Muslim saints, invaders of his time, the Sikhs and the Marathas. S.K. Dubey talks on Meer for his monologues:

"The novelist has stuffed the tales of Meer with lively anecdotes, historical periods, of the rule of his benefactor kings, Vandalism of invaders, ruination of the beautiful city of Delhi..."¹²

Khushwant Singh gives some more accounts of historical persons and events. He tells about Mrs. Alice Aldwell, the wife to an English civil servant who converts to Islam to escape persecution (but is still raped), the dynamic, inventive and shrewd Punjabi entrepreneurs who won the British contracts to build Lutyen's Delhi (Sir Sobha Singh, the writer's father, was one such person), to an angry young Hindu youth whose sister was abducted and raped in Pakistan, and has been disposed – of from Western Punjab during the Partition of India, looking for some work ends up singing up with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and takes revenge by inflicting violence upon Delhi Muslims, and accidentally becoming witness to perhaps the most important and decisive event in the country's history – the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. The novel ends with the terrorized narrator watching his Sikh neighbours mercilessly burnt alive by people angered due to the killing of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh guards. In his 'A Note from the Author' Khushwant Singh jokingly writes,

"History provided me with the skeleton. I covered it with flesh and injected blood and a lot of seminal fluid into it"¹³

Definitely, Delhi is a human document. Various critics view it as an authentic documentary, a detective travesty of history, and as a knowledgeable guide book in the shape of a novel. O.P. Mathur in his 'A Gloss on History' calls it as:

"Mind and Will: non-fictional prose."¹⁴

Conclusion:

To sum up we can say that Khushwant Singh is a great historical novelist. He was born in Pakistan and living in India, so he was deeply concerned with the



history and culture of both the countries. It is an indisputable fact that Khushwant singh has excelled almost all other Indian English novelist in artistry. All his novels present a panoramic view of the history of different times.



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