

Ideas and Art in the Short Stories of Khushwant Singh

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Since the beginning of human history man has been keenly interested in listing and telling stories. It has been the most ancient form of entertainment prevalent in all cultures. Man has taken keen interest in stories of all kind, whether it is an animal stories, tales of pure original fantasy, tales of didactic or metaphysical nature or the great religious stories to escape scourage of misfortune or getting over wearisome journey or the fairy tales. One can go on enumeration the ever expending plethora of myths, lord and legends that keep enriching human imagination for slackening man's unending thirst for adventure and the equality inexhaustible, treasure of stories that creative imagination keeps replenishing interminably.

Story telling then concerned relating deeds of a past chronicled in human memory and transmitted orally from age to age. This prevalent form of entertainment required consummate skill in intonation and effective pauses to maintain the pitch and timbre of excitement and surprises to the every end. Almost all stories in the beginnings were primarily in metrical verse form, meant to be recited at public audience and later got written in the medium long after the age of prose and silent leadership had gained momentum and supplanted the recitation by narration of events. The short story is that brief and concentrated literary form which has the engaging quality of keeping our interest and absorbed in the simple truth of life.

Really speaking the short story is a need, little portrayal of a slice of life, which has artistic completeness in spite of the limited world it deals with and the brevity and construction its tone and meaning and it tries to combined in a quite distinctive way, the representative realism of the novel with its own unique emotional and artistic effect that present an experience as something lived through. It is no wonder than that the short story has appropriated to itself a niche in popular imagination, both for its good entertainment value for money and the short time it requires vast more rewarding gains of insight and understanding in the sick hurry of modern life and its tormenting confusions.

Khushwant Singh's name is bound to go down in Indian literary history as one of the finest historians, novelists, political commentator an outstanding journalist, a social critic and short story writer. He is familiar to people as a spicy and provocative journalists and gripping novelist but he is essentially a short story writer.

In fact his writing career started with the publication of his collection of short stories-The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories. Though, he has been engaged in the writing The History of Sikhs and novels like Delhi, Train to Pakistan and The Company of Women, he was a born story teller and the urge to write stories did not cease in him and he went on writing short stories. He himself has quoted:

“And I enjoyed most, I feel best at, short stories because I am like a sprinter, I don't have the stamina for a novel. My attempt at writing a novel on Delhi is really an attempt at trying to string up a collection of short stories into a novel”(1)

Khushwant Singh was born in 1915 in village Hadali in Khushab District Sargodha, Punjab(now in Pakistan). He has worked in different capacities by assuming different offices as a journalist, editor and a writer of a great genius. He has been also a member of Rajya Sabha. He has been awarded Padam Bhushan in 1974 by the President of India which he returned in protest against the Union Government siege of the Golden Temple at Amritsar.

Khushwant Singh produced the following collection of short stories which have immortalized his name in history of Indo-Anglian short story writing:

1. The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories.
2. The Voice of God and Other Stories.
3. A Bride for the Sahib.
4. Black Jasmine.



In his short stories, Khushwant Singh does not deal with the deeper human emotions and sometimes he seems to be rather careless about the subject matter of short stories but the corruption in social set up struck to his mind. He also observed the corrupt practice of bureaucracy which finds expression in the story The Voice of God. In the story 'The Mark of Vishnu' he observes how the government servants talk of hard work but they do nothing. He finds a long array of characters who are responsible to bring disgrace to the Indian social life.

The hollowness of Indian culture also catches the attention of the writer. He has portrayed how Indians run after the western culture and feel proud of picking up something of the European culture. The story Karma illustrates the pathetic consequences of the snobbery and pride of Sir Mohan Lal who does not like his 'desi' type of wife Laxmi. Sir Mohan Lal, an England returned barrister, does not like to mix up with Indians. Sir Mohan Lal represents a class that of pre independence aristocrats while Laxmi represents the typical illiterate Indian women. Thus, this difference between East and the West and their encounter is commonly found in his stories.

Khushwant Singh is also described the theme of love and marriage. For him love is of two kinds -love for physical passion and love full of romantic yearning. He also highlights the arranged marriages in which the important consideration is neither love nor the willingness of the individual concerned. Marriage has been reduced to a commercial institution among the people of middle and upper class,

Whatever may be the subject matter of his any story, there is always a message of Nationalism behind the theme. He strongly pleads for strong Nationalism. He also criticizes the double faced nationalist who changes his garb to suit the conditions he is in. In the story A Love Affair in London he presents the devotion of Kamini Garve to her country and her strong belief in nationalism makes her so bold that she shouts slogans against the foreign rulers in the court of Robert Smith, a young handsome judge. It is kamini who shows shouts in the court "Tell him to go back to England and mind his business"(2).

Khushwant Singh also writes about the hollowness of religion of Indians who without any reason go to the extent of creating riots professing two different faiths. He also laughs at Indian superstitions and tries the message that superstitious beliefs, rites and rituals do not constitute real religion. In the story "The Mark of Vishnu" we find how Gangaram dies of snake bites only because of his superstitious belief who takes the snake as a mark of God on the Earth.

In the story "Black Jasmine" how satirically he points out how the Shikari shows inhumanity and cruelty while cutting the throat of the animals pronounces 'Bismillah'. What Khushwant Singh wants to suggest that the hollowness of the religion blunts man's reason.

Khushwant Singh uses mild humour, satire, irony and artistic symbols to present these themes in his stories. Most of his characters represent the ideology of Khushwant Singh who satirises the corrupt practices in the different fields of Indian life. The triumph of Khushwant Singh's art of story writing lies in his ironic mode used to present the hollowness and corruptions in different walks of Indian life.

References:

1. Language Forum Vol. VII nos. 1-4 April 1981 March 1982, p. 185
2. Khushwant Singh - A Love Affair in London, A Short Story