

# A Study on the Thematic and Stylistic Aspects of Khushwant Singh's Selected Short Stories

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## **Abstract;**

In the light of the brief discussion on the thematic and stylistic aspects of select short stories of Khushwant Singh, it would be apt to study and assess the Short Stories collection of Khushwant Singh, a writer with immense potentialities, but who has been discussed on margin in a tone of ridicule and contempt and who has been denied a placing in the realistic humanistic tradition of Indo-Anglian literature.

## **Introduction**

Indo- English short story has comparatively a short duration of life. The Indian stories were written before 60 to 70 years. MulkrajAnand and R.K. Narayan both started writing stories around 1940. The importance of Indo English short stories have hugely augmented today. They uttered the Indian life as a whole and have tried to understand the Indian emotional response 'The story of Anna', 'Boots', 'Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts', etc One of the remarkable writers of Indian literature is Khushwant Singh. Khushwant Singh one of his stories has shown in 'Karma' the slavish mentality of those Indian who disowned their own people in the days of their British Master. In his another story, 'The Mark of Vishnu', Khushwant Singh exposes the folly of superstition and blind faith. The servant Gangaram, a devotee of Lord Vishnu feed a king Cobra every night. One day the children of house kill the cobra and put him in a Tin box. Then they give the tin to the science teacher who opens it and finds a cobra alive. Gangaram dies on the spot. The snake bite lives a 'V' mark on Gangaram's face. Gangaram used to smear the mark of Vishnu on his forehead every day.

His stories are charming, obnoxious, study and bitter, but they are amusing. Some of his stories deal with stupidity, idiosyncrasy and unconventional behavior of the society. Khushwant Singh also reacts on bureaucracy in man. He also wonders about the policies of Government, he aggressively protests the policies of government in his articles, prose and stories. He also describes the affair of common man, he smiles and satires on these affairs. As an advocate he has anger for the incident happening in the society.

The present research paper is an attempt to bring out the thematic and Stylistic aspects in the following short stories. They are The Portrait of a Lady, Posthumous, The Voice of the God, The Mark of Vishu, Karma, A Bride for the Sahib, The Riot, A Love Affair in London

Khushwant Singh's stories are taken from the day to day incidents of ordinary human life. He handles various themes which are driven from the contemporary Indian scene. He himself makes the claim that his own personal commitment as a writer is to four eternal themes truth, love, solitude and death. He raises about the existence of God in only one story, The Anositc, Love and frustration is the greatest experience of human life. He is fascinated by various types and facts of love. That is reflected in his stories namely A Love affair in London and The Rape. He gives his suggestion that redemption from human sin can lie only in the act of love. Solitude is a theme which is used in Khushwant Singh's two short stories, A Town called Alice', A Love affair in London, Both The Portrait of a Lady and Posthumous deal with death.

He is an objective observer of the Indian social scene. So he has chosen the character from the country life. Hence, the recruitment theme in his stories is the corrupt and decadent social set up of present day India. In The Voice of God the bureaucracy which encourages the corrupt. In The Great Difference the hypocritical man of religion who defines all religious principles. In Karma the westernized Indian who has his roots in vacuums. In the Mark of Vishnu, the illiterate Indian who is steeped in blind beliefs and superstitious habits. In Man, How the Government of Indian Run the irresponsible Government servant who only talks of hard works doing nothing. In Mr.Singh and the colour Bar the pontifical and hypocrites Indian abroad who brings disgrace to his country by his uncouth behavior. In The Riot the religious fanatic creates disharmony among different communities by spreading rumors. All these theme are sharply criticized in his stories.

The characters in short stories are not just a portrait gallery, they emerge as a roll call of the virtual India made by a perceptive observe of Indian life. InfactKushwant Singh's characters are types representing the bahavioural patterns of the groups to which they belong. Same characters only have dominant individual traits. They help the writer to explain his social themes effectively. Referring to characterization in a work of art K.K. Naikwriters.

The Type of character is conditioned by the theme and the circumstances of the plot, and the success of the characterization is determined not by its being flat or round, or typical or particular, but by how well it fulfills the purposes of the plot and theme. ( 88)

The characters in Kushwant Singh's stories are life like and convincing viewed in the light of this statement. They range from the affectionate granny to the callous housewife, from the vociferous clerk to the proud barrister, from the superstitious servant to the highly westernized sahib from the poor farmer to the greedy landlord. The various characters develop his stories stimulating quality. At the same time contrasted characters are helpful to illuminate the central idea.

Karma is a popular tale which tells the broad and proverbial theme that pride goes before a fall. Sir Mohan Lal and Lachmi are husband and wife. But they do not have a mutual understanding. Husband's pride neglects his wife. Mohan Lal criticises everything Indian including his desi-type wife, Lachmi. Kushwant Singh's all writings are prompted by desire to hurt people whom he doesn't like. Nowhere he holds a charitable view of the anglicized Indian and how ruthless and harsh he is in his criticism can be proved from the way the snobbery of Sir Mohan Lal meets with its catharsis.

The story Karma takes back to the colonial days. At the time many anglicized Indians thought very high of themselves as they had picked up something of the European culture and demeanour. Sir Mohan Lal is the hero of the story Karma. He is a barrister who returned from England. He always follows the life style of the white rulers. He gets humbled in one of his train journeys. One day he decides to travel first class hoping to meet English gentleman who alone can be his match. His illiterate wife Lachmi is naturally to travel the inter class Zenana compartment. Sir Mohan Lal gets excited when he sees two British Soldiers entering his compartment.

Instead of trying to befriend with Sir Mohan Lal the drunk Tommies ask him to get down. He tried to impress them with his King's English. They simply slapped him and thrown out of the train. The humiliated barrister is lying on the platform when the train begins to move. His wife Lachmi, unaware of the incident, spits out the betel leaf Saliva. Its dribbles fall on her husband of course. The author himself spits on the vain glorious anglophile.

The character of Lachmi represents the typical illiterate Indian woman. She loves her husband but he is always indifferent to her, while her husband is ashamed of his Indian heritage, she is very much at home in Indian tradition and the Indian way of life. She bears all insults and lives in her own way without raising her voice in protest. She considers her husband her lord and master. He has no right to find fault with her because he himself is abarbaric. The author humorously suggests that it is the inevitable Karma of Sir Mohan Lal to be baptized by the dribbles of the betel leaf saliva of his uncouth wife.

*A Bride for the Sahib* is a tragic story. It deals with the system of arranged marriages and also speaks about the social malady caused by the system. It never bothers about love or the willingness of an individual. Marriage as a personal affair but it has lost its personal intimacy and touch. Now it has become a commercial institution among the upper and middle class people in India. Apart from the broad theme, Kushwant Singh speaks about the problems of marital dissonance generally caused among pairs with different temperaments, interests, habits, outlooks and cultures. The story goes back to the 40s. At the time there was a separate class of anglicized Indians. They were called as wogs by which means westernized oriental Gentlemen. But the gullible Indians called them respectfully as Sahibs. Srijutsen is the hero of the story. A Bride for the Sahib. He is known as sunny. He is a wog. He is an officer in the Indian Civil service. His miseries begin during his honeymoon. Having married a girl, Kalyani just to please his mother's wish. Srijutsen finds the sizeable dowry his mother collected and the astrologer's pronouncements of an ideal marriage haven't a bit endeared his wife to him. The westernised husband Srijutsen and the Orthodox wife Kalyani eat, move and sleep apart from each other on the first day itself only to cut short their so called honeymoon. They return home which refuses to give the

necessary peace leave alone marital bliss. It is very difficult to Kalyani to be with the uncompromising character of her Sahib husband Kalyani finally does what any Indian woman could do under the same situation commits suicide. Srijutsen calls his wife Kalyani. But there is no response to his calls with the help of the bearer, he breaks open the door and finds his wife Kalyani dead. It was the first time he had touched his wife after the marriage.

The story criticizes the existing system of matrimony. Besides, the writer makes the reader realize the extent of damage caused to the individuals. In this story, the action of the bridegroom has changed the bed room into black solitude. On the first day of marriage the bridegroom listening to the music namely 'The Bartered Bride is really condemnable. The author feels that the parental dominance in the selection of life partners, the existence of middleman in matrimonial affairs, match making organizations, the institution of advertisements in matrimonial columns of several newspapers, the dowry system, the giving of earnest money at the betrothal ceremony, the resort of religion are a sad commentary on the people of a country who elevated the act of sex to spiritual sublimity. It is not merely the individuals concerned who are to blame for the predicament, but the friction and failure that arise from the degeneration of Indian Society. With its pseudo religious fervor it tries to cloak the greed for money under the respectability of some well developed system. A Town called Alice is a story which deals with rootlessness of an Indian immigrant Saeed Alam is an eight year old immigrant from Baluchistan. He lives in a remote place, Alice in Central Australia. He grieves over the fact that no one will come forward to give him a Muslim burial ground when he dies when the narrator, an Indian visitor suggests that he may go back to his native country to spend the rest of his life with his people. At once, the western critic V.A. Shahane observes as

This is my home; these are my people this land gave me livelihood and I will sleep in this land I will not be a namak haram (traitor) ( 25)

The story, The Riot takes place in a peaceful village during the time when there is widespread communal frenzy. The Hindus and the Muslims of the village suspect each other. They also wait for a chance to exhibit their animosity. A surprisingly trivial incident like love making of two dogs belonging to the two different communities give them opportunity to indulge in violence.

There is a Hindu Shopkeeper. His name is Ram Jawaya. He tends a mongrel bitch named Rani. There is a Muslim green grocer named Ramzan. He owns a burly spaniel, Moti As usual, these two dogs try to seek the company of each other during the spring when the story stands. But the air being thick with communal frenzy, Ramzan separates Moti from Rani. Rani is forced to seek another lover. At one stage Moti leaves from Ramzan's clutches and attacks his rival outside Ram Jawaya's shop. Jawaya throws a stone at the dogs. Unfortunately the stone hits Ramzan who has come there to prevent Moti from loving Rani. The Man cries, "Murder, Murder. The rumor that a Muslim has been killed by a Hindu or a Hindu has been fatally injured by a Muslim spreads like wild fire. These leads to violence. After a few months, the village is returning to the normalcy (or) peace, when Ram Jawaya inspects the runs of his house, he finds Rani with her sister Moti is standing beside, watching his bastard brood. According to H.M. William comments

Life in the form of Rani, Moti and their bastard brood is asserted against the background of destruction of man caused by man. Life continues to sprout even in the midst of death (.55)

The Portrait of a Lady is a story about a grandmother. She represents all that is good in Indian culture and philosophy. She loves all creatures. Her character establishes fraternity not only with human being but also with animals and birds.

The story begins with a fine description of the grandmother.

She was always beautiful, she hobbled about the house in spotless white with one hand resting on her waist to balance her stoop and the other telling the beads of her rosary. Her silver locks were scattered untidily over pale, puckered face and her lips constantly moved in inaudible prayer yes, she was beautiful. She was like the winter landscape in the mountains an expanse of pure white serenity breathing peace and contentment. (TCSSK 45)

Life is very peaceful to the old woman in the village. She does her routine work sincerely she takes her grandson to the school reads the scripture regularly and the evening feeds of the dogs gives her infinite happiness. When she goes to the city to live with her daughter, Her life pattern is completely affected. But her love on fallow creatures remain same. Though her outward cheer disappears bearing testimony to her inner disturbance, she feeds sparrows with love and tends them with mother by affection.

The grandmother does not show her emotion when her grandson goes abroad for continuing his higher studies. Her emotions remain pent up in her it burnt-out completely a day after he returns to India. Her subdued behavior of a mute hugging is only a prelude to the final out burst of her wild glee of singing to the accompaniment of drums their violent emotions culminate in her tranquil prayer find its culmination in her peaceful end. Her death and sparrow's mourning are beautifully described in the story

She lay peacefully in bed praying and telling her beads. Even before we could suspect, her lips stopped moving and the rosary fell from her lifeless fingers. A peaceful pallor spread on her face and we knew that she was dead. In the evening we went to her room with a crude stretcher to take her to be cremated. All over the verandah and in her room right up to where she lay dead and stiff wrapped in the red shroud, thousands of sparrows sat scattered on the floor. There was no chirping we felt sorry for the birds and my mother fetched some bread for them. She broke it into little crumbs, the way my grandmother used to and threw it to them. The sparrows took no notice of the bread. When we carried my grandmother's corpse off, they flew away quietly. Next morning the sweeper swept the bread crumbs into the dust bin (TCSSK .46-47)

The Mark of Vishnu is a story about the devotee of Lord Vishnu, Gunga Ram. Gunga Ram is an old servant in a household. He believes in the divinity of snakes. He feeds a Cobra with a saucerful of milk every day. The hooded cobra is seen by the boys of the house hold. The mischievous boys do not waste the time in hitting the Kala Nag's back with

stones, when it is in a semi conscious condition they put it in a tin box and take it to the school. The cobra bursts out lissing and drags itself to the door when its lid is taken off at the science laboratory Gunga Ram stands outside the room and places a saucer containing milk before the snake. Then he sits on his knees and bows his head to ask for forgiveness. But the angry snake bits the old man on his forehead under neath their mark. Finally he dies Gunga Ram is superstitious. He represents thousands of Indians who still stick to age old beliefs. But none can question his belief. It is extremely pathetic to see the old man dying such a pitiful death.

The Agnostic is a story which has two fold one is Khushwant Singh's personal views on religion and second one is about the existence of God in particular. The central character of the story is a staunch agnostic. He is a mouth piece of the author. He puts across the views on God and religion. In this story there are three characters one is an agnostic and other twos are believers. They indulge in a debate on God's existence. The agnostic says the believers that if a particular incident occurs, he will accept the concept of the omni present almighty and that least expected thing happens and one of the jubilant believers tell the agnostic that it would teach his a lesson. But the agnostic that it would teach him a lesson. But the agnostic remains unperturbed and reacts in his usual way. He says that can teach him any lesson including the so called God.

A visitor says his host that he does not believe in God for religions are a numbo-jumbo of children's fairy tales. He speaks to the host's ten years old boy and tells him that your God is a Gas Balloon or like that red rubber ball you boys kick around in your garden. The hostess tells the visitor not to destroy the children's faith with this blasphemy. This argument continues even when they go for a walk. The hostess asks the visitor to change the topic bust he does not do that. The host retorts saying that there is an element of faith even in his strong and oft-repeated protestations. The next day morning all the three with the children go for a pinic. The children toss the rubber ball at each of the rubber ball high into the air. In one of the brand of the tree the ball gets stuck up. The visitor says that if the ball falls into his hands he would believe in God. A gentle breeze says the branches. Surprisingly the ball drops neatly into the visitor's hands. Allofthem stand in silence. The hostess tells the visitor that it would teach him a lesson Damni swore the Agnostic.

In this story the rubber ball is repeated several times. It is suggestive of the passive acceptance of ritualistic religion and the conventional idea of God by the behavior. As children use the ball as they like so the adult believers explain the concept of God as per their individual likes. The ball is the happy object for the children like that God is important for the adult believer.

The agnostic and the believers defend the views of their respective class. The agnostic has a scientific outlook. He is never ready to believe God. He tells to the believer as follow:

Even assuming there is a creator; there is no reason to worship them. There is more evil in the world than good. It is best to observe silence. This is the door to which no one has found the key, the veil beyond which no one cancels. It's more honest to say 'I don't know' than posit

theories which go contrary to reason. I neither know that there is a God, nor knows that there is no God. That is why I call myself an agnostic'. (TCSSK.66-67)

The Agnostic attempts to justify his view in the rational way. He wants to be honest in admitting the fact that he is ignorant of God and religion. At the same time the believers are conservative and like to expose the children to the agnostic's point of view. This only shows that they are not willing to let their children think for themselves and give their ideas about God and religion. It shows their strong faith on God and religion. One of the believers, hostess is right when she points out to the agnostic.

What amazes me is that a man who disdains all belief in the super natural should be so obsessed with the subject of God as you are. You provoke it as a man with a sore tooth provokes pain by feeling the tooth with his tongue. Perhaps in your strong protestations is an element of faith, which you refuse to admit like a man shouting in the dark to give himself courage (p.67)

Khushwant Singh takes sex in lighter vein but while defining love he is serious and highly philosophical. He believes that love is the greatest and the most exhilarating experience of life. Perhaps love and sex is life long quest for Khushwant Singh. One of Khushwant Singh's friends describe his (Khushwant) opinion on love: "Love, he felt, must be God, from whom flowed goodness, beauty and truth, the higher consciousness of being, an evolution towards transcendence, which was the destiny of man. Love was too serious to talk about, too difficult to realise, a bright star in an otherwise hum existence, from which life drew its meaning and perspectives."17 Indeed highly philosophical and religious way of thinking as is exemplified in the character of Sabhrai in 'I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale' and the grandma the Nightingale' and the grandmother of the short-story 'The Portrait of a Lady' and the affection of mother deer for its fawn in 'The Fawn'. For a realist like Khushwant Singh, who aims at showing minute details of social life, it is quite relevant that at times he uses this medium to expose the social relationship between persons and its irrational use devoid of any moral and traditional value in the Indian society which equates love with lust as depicted in 'The Company of Women' and 'Burial at Sea'.

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