



## **Khushwant Singh as a novelist Reality and Myth- An Overview**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines Khushwant Singh a King of Kings and considered as a many-sided personality in Indian Writing in English fiction and emphasis is laid on to analyze the important themes of partition, Quit India Movement, history of India, its past and present, cultural, social and political life of Sikh's community and their familial relationship, love and sex, sexual relationship of the hero, Mohan Kumar, in the company of women in New York and in India sex with his wife Sonu, and other women are presented with enormous talent and skill. This is evident in the style of his writings. Khushwant Singh has adopted the techniques of stream of consciousness in portraying characters in a unique and impressive way.

**KEYWORDS: - INDEPENDENCE –MYTH-RIOTS- BRUTAL**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Khushwant Singh, born on February 2, 1915 at Hadali in West Punjab (now in Pakistan), ranks among Indian's most distinguished men of letters. He is known as an essayist, novelist, short-story writer, historian, journalist, biographer, comedy writer and editor, attaining an international reputation for his superb writings. He has won numerous literary awards and appreciations. He was awarded "Grove Press India Fiction Prize" in 1956 for his novel *Mano Majra* (Train to Pakistan). His second novel, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1956) was appreciated for significant portrayal of Sikh life and traditions in the days of pre independence India. He has published three collections of short-stories, *The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories* (1950), *The voice of God and Other Stories* (1957) and *A Bride for the Sahib and Other Stories* (1967). His other famous books *A History of the Sikhs* (Two volumes) were published in (1963) and *The Mark of Vishnu* in 1950. His recent novels are *Delhi* (1990) and *The Company of Women* (1999). He was awarded the Punjab Government Prize for 'Distinguished men of Letters in India' in 1970 and „Padma Bhusan“ in 1974. The book on history of Sikhs earned for him „Nishan-e-khalsa“ award and a doctorate from the Guru Nanak Dev University. Khushwant Singh's first novel *Train to Pakistan*, originally entitled *Mano Majra*, is one of the finest realistic novels of post-World War II of Indian English Fiction. The novel pictures a village „Mano Majra“ in Punjab and his real experiences in rural India. The background of Punjabi literature also provides him essential style and technique for exploration of the experience of rural India. The train symbolizes both life and action, death and disaster. The scenes of the train coming from Pakistan which brings in countless corpses to *Mano Majra*, is awful and heart rendering. The scene and setting of the train present a funeral atmosphere. Unlike a normal train, the train from Pakistan had no headlight. It was „like a ghost“ symbolizing darkness and death.

Khushwant Singh's second novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* is the story of two families one Sikh and the other Hindu, set against the last period of British Raj in the Punjab province and just about five years before the achievement of India's independence. Although the novel substantially deals with India's concurrent political situations in Punjab, yet it is not a truly political novel since the politics in it apparently lacks a deep involvement with the situations, interest and commitment to the political motives and even the political philosophy. The novel has limited range and a restricted milieu and it does not go beyond an obvious limit of a socio-political narrative interests, though it has substantive elements of intensity and fullness of passion. Khushwant Singh has no apparent political motive. Commenting on Khushwant Singh's style of fictional writing. Mr. Phoebe Adams says; "Mr. Singh is a business like writer, not given to frills or subtlety. Even so, the novel is not entirely sober. There are mischievous caricatures, of minor officials ..... , and a scandalously funny episode in which the family's mistreated boy - of - all - work takes a Rabelaisian revenge. Mr. Singh gives the impression of being an artless and sometimes, a clumsy writer, but his major characters come to life, and their mistakes have the power to make the reader's conscience itch brutality, unsentimentally observant, and in his bold characterizations he is ready to explore the least appealing aspects of human nature and relationships. His humour expertly integrated with an essentially sad and cynical story - is wild, broad, unsparring

Khushwant Singh outlines the growth of various religious movements in the Punjab. The Nirankaris are the followers of Guru Dayal Das. The Radhaswamis of Beas is another sect. The Namdaharis are the dancing wanderers who chanted hymns. The Sikhs had to face two dangers - the Presbyterian mission in Ludhiana in 1835 and the conversion of Sikhs to Christianity. The second danger was the growth of powerful Arya Samaj. The partition of India into separate nations gave a severe blow to the Sikhs. Besides large-scale disruption and suffering to the Sikhs, the Sikh culture suffered a lot to preserve its identity. In conclusion we have a four-point problem confronting the future of Sikhs in India.

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## Reality and Myth

Khushwant Singh's novels and short stories express a sophisticated attitude to the life of India. He represents the generation of Indian writers whose literary careers have developed entirely since 1947 in an atmosphere free from British rule and the tension of nationalist revolt. Sophistication implies the ability to explore the truth and to face the truth fearlessly, the ability to be satirical and critical towards India and the freedom struggle. It implies too the shifting of interest noted by R.K. Narayan from public to private life, from political to psychological analysis. Khushwant Singh turns a relentless eye on complex reactions to such catastrophes as the Second World War and the bloody partition of India and Pakistan. To these events he brings objectivity and detachment; he is not one to flatter or to romanticize. Khushwant Singh has produced a couple of novels, some short stories, criticism, and two volumes of books on the history of the Sikhs. The life of his own people, the religious and ethnic community of Sikhs in the Punjab, provides a consistent thread through his work. His attitude to Sikhs and Sikhism also illustrates his sophistication in its combination of sympathy with criticism. *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh's first novel, reflects the cynicism and savagery generated by the atrocities committed on both sides during the partition of the subcontinent between India and Pakistan in 1947. The novel is placed in a village which Khushwant Singh calls *Mano Majra* situated exactly on the Pakistan-India, border. The village is a railway junction, otherwise it has no political or military importance. Its populations of Sikhs and Muslims, landlords and tenant farmers, live in easy comradeship. The only violence is from dacoits and the novel opens with a dacoit raid on the village-moneylender. The peace of *Mano Majra* is soon disturbed by violence on a much greater scale. Two trainloads of mutilated corpses reveal to the horrified villagers that the Sikhs and Hindus are being massacred in Pakistan. The Muslims of the village are rounded up and evacuated for their own safety and the Sikhs promise to look after their property.

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## Conclusion

Khushwant Singh's Endeavour at presenting the origin and growth of Sikhism and the many-sided development and achievement of this illustrious community over the five centuries is commendable in spite of several inevitable failings. Although a critic has declared that Khushwant Singh's work is "both too detailed for the general reader and too inexact to satisfy the scholar" I feel that it is a great effort toward presenting a definitive history of the Sikhs. Khushwant Singh could have perhaps avoided the accounts of border clashes of the 1840's, which repeat many nineteenth-century misconceptions of India's history. Many new documents and fresh materials have been made available in *Himalayan Battle-ground: Sino-Indian Rivalry in Ladakh* by Margaret Fisher. Khushwant Singh's account of the divisions among the Sikhs themselves is more penetrating and objective than Baldev Raj Nayar's presentation in *Minority Politics in Punjab*. Hafeez Malik reacts adversely to Khushwant Singh's assessment of the Muslim response to Ranjit Singh's rule. Khushwant Singh does not take note of, says Malik, many authentic works on contemporary history and relies solely on Mirza Hairat Dahlavi's *Hayat-i-Taiyaba*, which, it is believed, is not quite reliable. In the bibliography Dahiavi's book is shown as a Persian work, whereas it is actually written in Urdu. These minor flaws notwithstanding, Khushwant Singh's work is the true saga of a great people. In its perspective on the Arya Samaj, it offers new insights. It is not that Khushwant Singh's attitudes are always objective: he does not take a very liberal view of the Arya Samaj or even of the present-day secular India. His contention that the Hindus, "who form 80 percent of the population, will in due course make Hinduism the state religion of India," is open to grave doubt and seems to be a complete misreading of the secular character of Indian political and social conditions in general. One must admit that India offers far greater freedom of expression to its people than that which some of the Western democracies give to their people; in any case, this is proved by Khushwant Singh's own criticisms of Indian government and people. He seems to be a severe critic of Indian policies. The homeland that he advocated so passionately has come to stay, and the Punjabis, who clamored for a state of their own, have got it. What they make of it remains to be seen, however. One can only hope that Sikh religion and traditions will thrive in this new Jerusalem. But will they, indeed? Only the future will provide the answer. I have serious doubts about the possibilities of the growth of true Sikhism and its glorious traditions in a predominantly Punjabi state for the simple reason that it is only a challenging situation that has brought out the best among the Sikhs through the last five centuries. Khushwant Singh, along with other Sikh historians, has sufficient grounds to realize that it was not after all the Anglo-Sikh alliance that transformed their cherished ideal of a Punjabi state into an achieved ideal but the government of India which finally created it with a lovely capital at Chandigarh. The Sikhs sided with the British in the 1857 mutiny and fought many gallant battles in the 1914-18 and the 1939-45 wars only to be uncerebrally and ominously brushed aside at the time of India's Partition. These are incontrovertible facts of history, but Khushwant Singh does not seem to condemn sufficiently this aspect of the British role in recent history. The reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* frankly admits the British failure to take note of the Sikh sentiment at the time of the liberation of Gurdwaras in as much as Jawaharlal Nehru failed to realize the depth of Sikh sentiment in 1960-61 for the creation of a Punjabi Suba, since he refused to grant it then. Against this, the government of India headed by Indira Gandhi is far more friendly and sympathetic to the Akalis than any other government in India of this century. In a perceptive review of the two volumes of *A History of the Sikhs*, Nigel Cameron calls the principal feeling underlying this comprehensive work "tragedy." All through their history, the Sikhs from the days of the early Mughal and Muslim persecution to the present day of the threat of their absorption into Hinduism, had to face, it is said, a tragic destiny. While fully realizing the genuine element in this interpretation, I feel that the Sikh destiny is not tragic. On the contrary, it represents the truly Punjabi spirit, the consciousness of firmness and determination to face the evil, and an attitude of affirmation before the stimulating challenges of life. Khushwant Singh's scholarly and comprehensive presentation of the long and chequered history of the Sikhs is written with passion and power and is characterized by objectivity, equipoise, and fidelity to truth. Only a liberal Sikh could have written this history with such sympathy and inward understanding. One of the main virtues of the work is that it is permeated by genuine Punjabi consciousness, and yet it is not tendentious. It amply demonstrates the truth that history is not an accurate record of a dead past or of inert facts; it is a living organism, pulsating with life. It is also a vital link between the past and the present, which are unified in a continual sequence of national history.

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