



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Linguistics

CONTEMPORARY SOCIO CULTURAL HISTORY OF INDIA IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Khushwant Singh was one of the paramount Indian writers and journalists of all times. Khushwant Singh has an India-wide understanding of our social problems. His writings depict with force, brilliance and passion the problems which torture and torment the Indian spirit in contemporary times. He has pointed out the drawbacks that plague India, which hold her back from moving full steam ahead on the path of progress. If we seek to understand the India of today which we love so passionately, we find a vivid reflection of it in his writings. In Indian literary history Khushwant Singh's name is bound to evolve as one of the finest historians and novelists, a forthright political commentator, and an outstanding observer and social critic. He is attributed with freethinking. Kushwant Singh's comparisons of social and behavioral characteristics of Indians and Westerners are the examples of his acid wit.

Khushwant Singh is the most well-known author, columnist and journalist of India with an international readership. Since the past several years he had been working upon his autobiography. This was intended to be his swan song. But Knowing Singh's penchant for not mincing words, it was to be expected that the autobiography would cause some ruffled feathers. And it did. In October, 1995 an extract of his autobiography, Truth, Love and a Little Malice, was published in India Today. This greatly upset Menaka Gandhi, the younger daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi and then Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment. She felt that portions of the book infringed upon her privacy. Consequently she filed a case seeking a stay upon the book. However the question of privacy does not arise because, Khushwant Singh has written about the widely-publicized fracas between Indira Gandhi and Menaka Gandhi. The incident had occurred in full view of public servants, personal secretaries and police officers. Subsequently Menaka had to leave the prime ministerial house. At the time this had happened, Menaka had herself rung up Khushwant Singh so that he could alert the foreign press. Much later the two fell out with each other. The first round has gone to Menaka Gandhi with the Court ruling in her favour in April 1997. The Book was scheduled to be released in January 1996 but it was published in 2000. Now literary circles are waiting for Khushwant Singh's next move.

In Order to comprehend the works of Khushwant Singh, it is first necessary to understand his ideas on fiction and his major concerns. This will give a better insight into his choice of themes upon which he has based most of his writings. It is fairly obvious that his personal experiences and the historical events that shaped the country play a major role in his works. Critics believe that the Punjab countryside, the capital of India-Delhi and the city of London are the most important influences upon him. Exposed as he has been to the ideas and attitudes of the West, Singh is essentially an Oriental who has succeeded in maintaining his Indian self and individuality.

In order to explore the autobiography of Khushwant Singh, it is first necessary to understand his life and his ideas on fiction and his major concerns. This will give a better insight into his choice of the themes upon which his most of the writings are based upon. It is fairly obvious that his personal experiences and the historical events that shaped the country play a major role in his works. The researcher believes that the Punjab countryside, the capital of India-Delhi and the city of London are the most important influences upon him. Exposed as he has been to the ideas and attitudes of the West, Singh is essentially an Oriental who has succeeded in maintaining his Indian self and individuality. The researcher has found his autobiography a useful tool to explore his growth as an individual well as a great contemporary Indian novelist writing in English. When he utters these words "I am not a nice man to know." His autobiography informs us a lot about him-about milieu, moment and race.

Khushwant Singh's autobiography is a book which he has written with all the honesty. He is a witness to Modern India and also the

partition to emergency and Independence. He has given a full insight of his both personal and professional life, his success and failures. As the title say there is truth of his professional encounter, Love for the many women's in his life and yes there is little peg of malice too. Few chapters are really hilarious where he writes about the variety of odd people he had met in his life. And he ended on a serious note telling about his wife's illness and his feeling that he would quit writing if she leaves the world before him. As his self-styled swansong, it does him proud. His hugely prolific writing career means that many aspects of his life and the constant parade of eminent people who affected its direction, one way or another, are a matter of record.

Yet, such is his skill as a writer - simple, lucid, unpretentious - that oft-known episodes are given a new lease of life. The infamous battle in the prime minister's house when Mrs Gandhi ordered Maneka to leave and the hysterical drama that followed.

His first encounter with Nehru in London where, as public relations officer, he faced the embarrassment of seeing the British papers awash with photographs of Lady Mountbatten receiving the Indian prime minister well past midnight dressed in a negligee, and numerous other incidents of less import but equal enjoyment.

He is unsparing about Krishna Menon, his boss at India House in London. His relationship with Menon was prickly at best, but Khushwant's accounts expose Menon as an unscrupulous scoundrel, a congenial liar and a womaniser.

In Autobiography, Khushwant Singh deals with partition not as a Hindu or a Muslim or a Sikh; he was above communalism and spoke unequivocally against it. Khushwant Singh's autobiography is a sort of platform to deal with his personal and professional triumphs as well as his failure, but sometimes he transcends those personal feelings and fears and gives us a glimpse of more serious matters which shaped India's future. Very subtly he takes up the matter of politics and does not hesitate to comment forthrightly on these vulnerable issues and also act where necessary. He does not believe in God. He was on the hit list of the Khalistani terrorists and makes fun of it and says maybe he was a soft target and getting him would have given them some publicity, which they badly needed. He was fully aware of the brevity of life: there is so much to do and little time to do it. He valued literature above religious scriptures. He thinks of idleness as a self-inflicted, time wasting disease, which afflicts lethargic people. He reveals himself without shame and remorse. The novel being an autobiography is written in sequential manner beginning with the childhood episode of KS to the present day. Singh who has been a witness to all the major events in modern Indian history- from independence and partition to emergency and operation blue star remains forthright in telling them. He also has stories to tell about many influential people like Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Lady Mountbatten, Jinnah, Amrita Shergill and many more. He records the comforts and disappointments in his marriage of over sixty years; his first, awkward sexual encounter; his phobia of ghosts and his

fascination with death. In one of the chapters he writes about the ingredients essential to be a good writer. Autobiographical remembering not only as being subject to the dynamic interplay between memory, self and culture, but also to socio-historical changes over time within the same cultural context. Cross-cultural studies concerning the onset and content of autobiographical memories of adults have been mainly conducted with homogenous age segregated cohorts, living in the same historical time within different cultural environments.

Khushwant Singh's work has socio-religion-political context, but he is not always in the mood of iconoclastic anger. He is not a committed writer in the narrow sense of being bound up with an ideology or a school. There is no didacticism or moralization in his novels. He neither uses his art for allowed propaganda, nor professes indulgence in art for art's sake. He is the artist's detachment with a humanistic basis. Khushwant Singh very efficiently portrays the real picture of the contemporary society and the social, political and religious behaviour of the people.

Ultimately, Khushwant Singh tries to establish his vision of humanism as an antidote against violence and communalism. Being a humanist, he cannot help speaking from the point of view of the common man. He warns us that we should stop letting the politicians use religion to take advantage of the sentiment of the masses. This only leads to bloodshed, tremendous loss of life and property. Singh very competently analyses the use of religion by the rulers from the earliest times. He indicates the politicians and holds them responsible for the ills that plague our society. Instead of addressing the real issues like economic disparity, the people in power are only concerned with consolidating their own positions. He also makes the readers aware of charlatans in our society who prey upon unsuspecting people in the guise of religion. He does this in a very genial, good-natured and humorous manner. He does not try to hurt the sentiments of any particular religious community in any of his writings. Neither does he mock at those for whom belief in their particular religion is something holy and sacred. Rather, he reveals the positive aspect of religion. In India there is an inexorable link between religion and politics. Khushwant Singh being a journalist and a sociologist of sorts has taken note of this fact.

Khushwant Singh is able to write so feelingly about religion and politics because he has been personally involved with the subject. His earliest memories are those of his grandmother reciting passages from the Granth Sahib and the Sukhmani. Years later he was a spectator to the horror unleashed by the partition. He was also a witness to the terrible tragedy of the anti-Sikh riots. It is his close association with these subjects that has enabled him to write so poignantly about them. Beginning with Hadali and his grandmother, both of whom have been immortalized in his writings.

It is not entirely clear how much of the autobiographical recall differences between the older and younger cohort are due to societal norms and standards at the time the self was formed (early childhood) and how much of the differences might be due to age-related ways of remembering.

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