CHAPTER VI

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Khushwant Singh's fictional art is pervaded by a comic view of life, which accepts things as they are. His vast experience and journalistic career made him sketch many eminent men and women from different walks of life with a characteristic humour. Singh's fiction is marked by liveliness, gentle irony, humour, fun, satire and an irresponsible comic spirit. This iconoclastic stance or satirical mode is a significant aspect of his creative art.

In Singh's fiction the comic is linked with social and moral criticism and is an effective source of laughter. Almost all his short stories are also marked by a preponderant comic spirit which assumes various forms. The comedy is often created by the ridiculousness of situation and characters involved in an activity which is incongruent. Even though Singh laughs at the laughable foibles of human nature, because of his love for humanity, the satire hardly pricks. His humour has a social context in so far as it works as censor of social evils or absurdities.

Khushwant Singh's forte is his satire. Quite often he uses sharp satire in his stories. One of the
finest examples of his oblique satire is given below:

Her [Lady Lal's] mouth was bloated with betel Salvia which she has been storing up to spit as soon as the train had cleared the station.... Lady Lal spat and sent a jet of red dribble flying across like a dart.¹

The writer does not tell his readers anything but action tells volumes. Charles in "The Butterfly" is also satirized for aping King's English:

Perhaps the King's English derived its royal prefix from the way King Charles spoke. Some words Charles used we had never heard. What impressed us more was that even the Oxford Dictionary did not know them. There was invariable 'Yus Mun or No Mun'.²

Singh's art of satirical portrayal is seen at its best in the sketches of Mr. and Mrs. Kanjoos. His satire is further emphasized by the deliberate choice of names given to his characters. The names indicate their personal traits and behavioural patterns.

Singh's talent is best suited for ludicrous comedy. He pushes everything into the furnance of his comic imagination, and outcomes a totally humorous picture. In many of his stories we find incongruity as the source of humour. One has an emotional shock due to what one expects and what one finds. The recognition of the wide difference

². Ibid., p. 17.
between what is and what ought to be produces refreshing and invigorating humour. A slight touch here, a little exaggeration there, and the whole character is transformed into a veritable source of laughter. Singh's gift of humour has endeared him to millions of his readers. He has enlarged the boundaries to comic art and witnessed its scope. His concept of comedy covers a wide range from wry farce and simple witticism to irony.

Irony is one of the powerful tools of Singh's. It is a device with double or dual meaning: it says one thing and means another. It arises out of the interrelation between two levels of meaning, one of which seems to negate the other, and the contrast assumes a striking effect. Irony in Singh is sometimes a mode of what is said is to be understood. At other times it results from a discrepancy between an expectation and its realization. Quite often the total effect of the story is ironic.

The title, structure and meaning of the first story, "The Voice of God" for example, in the first collection, The Voice of God and Other Stories, are marked both by verbal irony and irony of situation. It is a story of the people of two villages in the Punjab, Bhamba Kalan and Bhamba Khurd, where "nothing that is important ever happens".3

But the placid life at Bhamba was disturbed by

3. Ibid., p. 33.
electioneering and political activities. The English Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Forsythe, arrived at Bhambha ostensibly on an official visit, but actually to canvass support of Ganda Singh, who had earlier helped the British Government in suppressing peasant agitations and the Congress Movement. Ganda Singh was a notorious leader of dacoits and thugs; "his men robbed with impunity and shared and proceeds with the police". ⁴ He was greatly hated by the people of the area because of his cruelties, injustices and aggressive activities. Mr. Forsythe, however, "paid tributes to Ganda Singh as the pride of the district". ⁵ The nominee of the nationalists was Kartar Singh, patronized by Seth Sukhtankar, millionaire. The main drift of the Seth's speech was that "if 400 million Indians united and spat in a tank, there would be enough spit to drawn the entire English population in India". Singh's comment is a fine example of humour: "But somehow the facilities for such a mass suicide had never been provided". ⁶

Baba Ram Singh, a genuine worker among poor peasants, and an old and pious farmer, not only lost the election but also forfeited his deposit. Ganda Singh was declared elected. Khushwant Singh's comment has his characteristic touch: "the people had spoken. The voice of the people is the voice of God". ⁷

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4. Ibid., p. 35.
5. Ibid., p. 35.
6. Ibid., p. 37
7. Ibid., p. 39.
Another story "Karma" depicts the slavish psychology of the educated Indians in British India. Sir Mohan Lal's encounter with his mirror was essentially a confrontation with the self. The mirror was India-made, and "the red oxide of its back had come off a several places and long lines of translucent glass cut across its surface". Sir Mohan Lal looked upon the mirror with pity and patronage since to him it was a symbol of everything Indian and native, inefficient and indifferent, dirty and intolerable. He wore the suit tailored at Saville Row, which symbolized British aristocracy and upper-class culture, and Balliol tie, which showed his exclusive Oxford upbringing and educational attainment. While at the railway, the train arrived, Sir Mohan Lal's luggage was deposited in the first class compartment. But the two English soldiers picked up and threw Sir Mohan Lal with luggage out of the train. The irony of Sir Mohan Lal's fate was that while he lay prostrate and humiliated on the platform, his wife, Lachmi, travelled in comfort in her interclass compartment. This indicates her unconsciously gained triumph and is in ironic contrast with the most unexpected defeat, humiliation, and misery suffered by her husband at the hands of the two illiterate, illbred and aggressive tommies. It is also ironic that Sir Mohan Lal, the inveterate admirer of everything English, should suffer at the hands of Englishmen themselves.

8. Ibid., p. 8.
"The Great Difference" is a comical, ironical and farcical story and provokes laughter tinged with mischievous humour. At the World Congress of Faiths in Paris a voluptuous French auto-huntress approaches a Muslim, a Hindu, and the Sikh narrator. "Her steatopygous behind", the narrator observes, "was an invitation to lustfulness forbidden by the laws of man. We signed our names". Their response to her desire to learn about the tenets and merits of their respective faiths is quite magnanimous. Separate appointments are made so that she can discover the difference between these religions. After keeping appointments with the Hindu and the Muslim this shrewd leader tells the narrator that she had found the difference by applying the infallible test.

"Posthumous", the first story in The Collected Short Stories of Khushwant Singh, is a humorous fantasmagoria of the author's own life. His imagination could create all kinds of situations, and he visualizes his death and a series of scenes of persons consoling his widow and children for their irreparable loss. He writes "I feel very sorry for myself and for all my friends. With difficulty I check the tears which want to express at my own death. But I also feel elated and want people to mourn me. So I decide to die-just for the fun of it as it were". Since he could not decide on a course of action he wished to flip a coin to

10. Ibid., p. 1.
decide. At this crucial point his reverie abruptly comes to an end. Thus Khushwant Singh spares no pains to laugh even at himself in the face of his own death.

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* also deals with human suffering, misery and pessimism which is balanced by admiration for the spirit of adventure and lust for living. Singh's view of life, accordingly, is conceived in terms of conflict between the rare individual, who embodies the spirit of adventure, and man in general, whom Singh regards as essentially evil. In *Train to Pakistan*, Jugga is conceived as the moral exception:

... I thought it was time one exploded this myth of the innate goodness in man. There is innate evil in man. So I just wrote about it, and I did create one character whom I stuffed with the so-called innate goodness of man, and he is only character which is entirely fiction.

Juggat Singh, Iqbal, Hukum Chand are vital to the moral design of *Train to Pakistan*. But Hukum Chand intrigues to link the murder of the moneylender with the communal situation in order to facilitate the evacuation of the Muslims. Iqbal's moral inadequacy is of a different kind. When he is released from jail he is fully aware of the planned massacre of the departing Muslims and that, on the

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basis of his ideological commitments, he has a moral obligation to try to stop the slaughter. However, his genuine feeling of impotence is strengthened by an intellectual despair:

Where on earth except in India would a man's life depend on whether or not his foreskin had been removed? It would be laughter if it were not tragic.\textsuperscript{12}

In Iqbal's case rationalization serves not merely to justify the view that in "a state of chaos self-preservation is the supreme duty",\textsuperscript{13} but also to hide a guilty feeling of moral defect. While Jugga acts, Iqbal drinks himself into a sleep with whisky and logic.

In \textit{I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale} also Khushwant Singh is preoccupied by the theme of the antithesis between violence and right moral conduct. Whatever incipient moral sense Sher Singh has is destroyed by his desire to be what he is not. The dark shadow on Buta Singh's family, after a period of two months of sighing and sickness, is offset by a joke:

'What is it'? asked Beena. Shunno could not speak, she was convulsed with laughter. The smile still played on Sabhrai's pallied face. Beena came close to her and she whispered the same words into her daughter's ear. Beena also burst out laughing.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 188.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 194.
'Tell us the joke too' said Buta Singh, smiling eagerly. Beena held her laughter. 'Mama says there is a bulbul on the bough'. Everyone including Buta Singh began to laugh. He brushed his mustache with his napkin and asked: 'Has it flown'? Sabhrai nodded her head slowly still smiling.  

As the sequence of events in the novel enters its last phase, Buta Singh says to Mrs. Joyce Taylor:

'Thank you madam'. As a famous English poet has said, 'All's well that ends well'.

This statement provides the key note to the experience expressed in the novel and it comprises all the social political moral and religious strands portrayed in it.

Khushwant Singh in Delhi, too, brings out humorously the love-hate them of the novel moving around Bhagmati at the individual or personal level. His historical vision is contradictory. Delhi is a conglomeration of various peoples and communities. In the very beginning of the novel, Singh states:

What you have to do for things to appear different is to cultivate a sense of belonging to Delhi and an attachment to someone like Bhagmati.

In the light of the above statement the author portrays the character of Bhagmati symbolically. The character of Bhagmati represents essential duality writ large on the

15. Ibid., p. 243.
society and history of Delhi. It does not possess the physical characteristics of either sex - male or female. The author, in the guise of the narrator, loves the city and establishes an affair with Bhagmati. The skeleton material of history is interspersed with dialogues and monologues of the narrator, sharing a rational, national, humanist approach to men and events and a delight in draining the cup of life to its dregs. The person almost completely breaks down in the later chapters, where the narrator describes himself as a descendant of those who built the city of New Delhi and where he takes upon himself the task of describing events clustered around the Operation Bluestar and the anti-Sikh riots. True to his sexy humour he described the narrator as carrying on an affair with the hijda to whom he returns like a time-traveller, after every foray into history.

If we go by the author's version, "If Delhi is the body, Bhagmati is its soul" then it is that fraction of author's personality which he has presented under the guise of Bhagmati. Thus Bhagmati and the author-narrator are complementary to each other. It is a strange amalgamation. How could he who brags page after page of his victories and achievements tamely accepts a 'Hijda'? Bhagmati's character when juxtaposed with that of the author goes to give us shy humour.

17. Ibid., A Note from the Author.
Khushwant Singh does not believe in showing off his learning through his language. He has, however, revolted against the deceptively soft and sweet style like that of the Romantics and what he believes to be its fake exterior. As V.A. Shahane writes,

Another significant aspect of Khushwant Singh's use of language and style is his realistic, down-to-earth idiom, transposed from Panjabi to English, which is pronounced expression of the quality of his mind and his view of life. He unconsciously, almost inevitably revolts against the deceptively soft and sweet style of the Romantics and what he believes to be its fake exterior.

English, quite naturally, getting rid of that 'alien spirit' that hovers over him while using this language. Sometimes 'Indianness', the pull of the mother tongue, however, overcomes him and hampers the easy glid of narration. It may be due to his eagerness to present the actuality of life lived in the Indian socio-cultural context.

Khushwant Singh, like some other Indian English writers, makes use of vernacular words in his writings to evoke Indian social and cultural scenes. He has borrowed Indian words and used transliterations, literal translations, parallelisms, translations from scriptures and Indian proverbs and idioms to convey the cultural nuances of Indian life.

Khushwant Singh's use of transliteration and transcription of Hindi and Punjabi expressions is a salient characteristic of his style. This aspect of his style may be called Punjabism. His characters exclaim 'Hai', 'Oye', 'Oi', 'Hai-hai', which also re-creates punjabi atmosphere. Swear words, abuses, modes of greeting, words of protests and exclamations are also scattered all over his work. Some of these expressions are amusing; e.g. 'todi baccha' (son of to-day), 'jholi chook' (one who stretched his apron for alms), 'That incestuous lover of his sister!', 'They shut their eyes piously and stand on one leg like a yogi doing penance; as soon as a fish comes near - hurrup, 'A snake can cast its slough but not its poison', 'He is one of a hundred', 'Whatever you say is right to the sixteenth anna of the rupee', 'They are a race of four twenties', 'We keep saying 'ji', 'ji' to you all the time, but you want to sit on our heads', 'what seducer of his mother can throw bangles at me?', 'They did a lot of zulum', 'you think it is your father-in-Law's house', 'he will put hot chillies up your bottom', 'Mother, sister, daughter - he did not leave out', 'As for the babu, for all we care he can sleep with his mother', 'That penis of a pig who sleeps with his mother, pimps for his sister and daughter, if he puts his foot in Mano Majra I will stik my bamboo pole up his behind!' etc. The use of such expressions makes the character true to the soil to which they belong.

Furthermore, we find literal translations of Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi expressions, which appear rather
unobtrusively, e.g.

- "If you want to jump in well, jump. If you want to hang like your father, go and hang. It is my lot to weep. My Kismet".
- "What honourable noun does your honour bear?"
- "Where does your wealth reside, Babu Sahib?"
- "You have been eating my ears with your 'Sentry Sahib'". 19
- "Sardar Sahib, you are big man and we are but small radishes from an unknown garden".
- "'My nose has been cut. I can no longer show my face to the world', he sobbed". 20
- "That's in the past-tense – three years ago".
- "Your slave's abode of poverty is in Lal Kuan".
- "Could I go to the Kotwal Sahib and ask him to order my wife to spread her legs for me".
- "'My eyes have come', ...
   'My body is breaking'". 21

Many 'Indianisms' and literal translations of Indian expressions and idioms into English are used. Some of them are based on popular expressions; e.g. "My Kismet has waked up at last", "I am going to be the servant of your feet", "who eats whose salt.", "Keep your tongue in Check", to quote only a few.

Swear words come in handy for a speaker to express his anger: 'Sala', 'Susra', 'bahinchod', 'Motherchod', 'bewakoof' and others serve this purpose. Singh's literal translations from Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu also contain curses and swear

19. Train to Pakistan, pp. 20-21, 52, 53, 140, respectively.
20. I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, pp. 27, 182, respectively.
21. Delhi, pp. 31, 35, 53, 377, respectively.
words. A few examples from his novels are given below:

- "Open, you son of fornification, Or we will kill the lot of you".
- "Come out, if you want your mother and sisters raped".
- "May Allah's curse be on you". 22
- "Progacy of pigs, you want to kill us?"
- "Oi, Oi, Oi, I yell you harami ..." 23

Through the use of these words, Singh attempts to render the exact nature of relations between people and classes. In **Train to Pakistan** Jugga says to Malli, the dacoit:

"This is to rape your mother. This your sister, this your daughter, this for your mother again. And this ... and this". 24

"May your mother die ... you son of a pig ... I will settle this with you". 25

Regarding literal translations of Indian expressions into English by Khushwant Singh Iyengar opines:

> These are peculiarities of Indian life and experience and speech that don't easily admit of translation into English terms. If translation is not attempted one fails in one's duty as an Indian, if the attempt does not succeed, if the result is an exotic, an oddity, an excrescence or an absurdity, one fails as a writer in English what is written has to be recognizably Indian to the Indian

22. *Train to Pakistan*, pp. 16, 19, 23 respectively.
23. *Delhi*, pp. 48, 92 respectively.
25. Ibid., p. 136.
reader and recognizably English to the English reader.\textsuperscript{26}

Singh's Indianisms, curses, abuses, and swear words catch the precise nuances of Indian speech. Singh's style, as M.K. Naik points out, is "hard and vigorous, employs colourful Punjabi expletives and terms of abuse a la Anand while his irony is horned like a sikh-sword".\textsuperscript{27}

In spite of what Naik and Iyengar say about the aptness of Singh's use of literal translations of Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu words, phrases idioms, proverbs, sometimes this kind of use appears to be deliberate. His Indian characters use the translations of Indian proverbs and idioms:

- "Money is dirt on back of hand".
  \textit{(Paisa to hath ka mail hai.)}
- "Where have you been blackening your face"?
  \textit{(Kahan se muh kala kar ke aye ho.)}
- "A country cannot have two kings any more than an a scabbard hold two swords".
  \textit{(Ek myan mein do talwar nahnin rah sakti.)}
- "A home bred chicken tastes no better than tentil".\textsuperscript{28}
  \textit{(Ghar ki murgi dal barabar.)}
- "... a snake can cast its slough but not its poison".
  \textit{(Saanp apna kenchul chhor skta hai par jahar nahnin.)}


\textsuperscript{27} M.K. Naik, \textit{A History of Indian English Literature}, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1982, p. 220.

\textsuperscript{28} Delhi, pp. 9, 31, 64, 87, respectively.
- "Why should I have myself insulted by having my turban taken off"?
  (Main apni pagri khud kyon ucchaloon.)
- "A wise man swims with the current and still gets across". 29
  (Buddhi maan admdi wakt ke anusar chalta hai.)

Another type of Indianism found in Singh's writing is his use of rhyming words which Indians in general are in the habit of using even with English words; e.g. whiskey-shisky, transistor-shranzistor, camera-shamera, watch-shatch, accident-shaksident, etc. Moreover, in order to give a local and realistic touch, Singh has translated and transliterated some well-known filmi songs of that period from the vernacular and used them in the novel Train to Pakistan:

- "In the breeze is flying
  My veil of red muslin
  Ho sir, Ho sir",
  (Hava mein upta jae
  Mera lal dupatta mulmul ka
  Ho ji, ho ji)
- "Sunday after sunday, O my life".
  (Ana meri Jaan sunday ke sunday
  Ana meri jaan.)

And in Delhi we find some very fine translation of well-known couplets from famous Urdu poets like Shaikh Saadi and Mirza Ghalib. In doing so Singh's aim is to reproduce the local Punjabi atmosphere.

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29. Train to Pakistan, pp. 55, 99, 116, respectively.
Singh's use of alliteration, onomatopoeic and rhyme words are other significant features of his prose. He has an almost unique gift of making the sound of his words fit the sense. Some alliterative expressions are given below:

- "Swish swash of silk"
- "full in the face"
- "beaten with butts of gun".
- "her slippers sloshing on the ground".
- "... finish the shilly-shallying".  
- "... Long, springy strides".
- "The fluffy plumes of pampas".  
- "... the stun stands stiff in its plumed pride".
- "... Delhi is a city where dust drifts in deserted lanes".  

A sets of words like 'swing, swish, swash, swirl' conveys a quick movement.

Yet another characteristic of Singh's style is his use of uncommon words. Often in place of familiar he selects one less known but equally effectively expressive. Thus he uses verbs such as 'yanks', 'squaks', 'winces', 'chortles', 'wheezes wafts'. Occasionally, he prefers a word of his own coinage such as 'darlinged honeyed', 'cough-laughs', 'clip-clops', 'Judas-hole'. He also uses uncommon adjectives words, e.g. cool bosky shade, pied

30. Ibid., pp. 15, 18, 19, 44, 79, respectively.
32. Delhi, pp. 116, 228, respectively.
crested cuckoos, musty earthy smell, large oazelle eyes, falsetto voice, slimy clammy bellies, shimmering haze, spinterish sip.

Singh's language is sufficiently diversified. In the short story of *A Bride for the Sahib*, for example, the hero is a pucca Anglo-Indian Englishman who gets involved with a desi type of girl. The difference in their background and social status is enormous and the difference in their speech symbolizes this essential incompatibility. The first conversation between Mr. Sen and Mrs. Kalyani Sen, who speaks in her Bengali accent, after their marriage is as follows:

'Do you want shit outshide'?
'What?' he asked gruffly, waking up from his reverie.
'Do you want to shit inshide or outshide? The deener ees on the table'.
'Oh I'll be right in. You go ahead I'll join you in a second'.

As expected, such a faulty pronunciation embarrasses Mr. Sen, who wishes that Mrs. Sen would not say things like 'shit' (sit) or 'deener' (dinner) or 'inshide' (inside). Elsewhere linguistic diversity has been used for humorous purposes. In *Delhi* Bhagmati says: "I thought you would like to take me out in your motor car to eat some fresh air and mangoes". These features, however, are restricted to

34. *Delhi*, p. 47.
Singh's dialogues. The language comes in particularly handy in distinguishing characters in respect of their social status. And Singh has done it effectively. V.A. Shahane's observation that "A very interesting aspect of Khushwant Singh's achievement as a writer of fiction is his use of the English Language".  

is correct.

Singh has also used some unusual images; e.g.

"They are as good saints as the crane".
"He is the tallest man in this area. ... He is like a stud bull".
"See how he sleeps like a pig".
"Otherwise, I will beat you behind till it looks like the behind of a ram".
"He Shook Malli as a terrier shakes a piece of rag from side to side".
"They have behind like snakes".  
"He looks like a gorilla".
"He shook them off like a wounded wild boar shakes off pi dogs at the end of a chase".  

In all the examples quoted above the similes have been taken from the animal and plant kingdom.

Although notable marks of Singh's prose are vitality and a keen sense of actuality, there are certain weaknesses in it. His language becomes rhetorical whenever he described a lady's beauty. At one place he even compares

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35. Quoted in S.K. Desai (ed.) Experimentation with Language in Indian Writing in English (Fiction), p. 128.
36. Train to Pakistan, pp. 31, 33, 70, 92, 136 and 144, respectively.
37. I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, pp. 167-68.
the dome of a mosque with 'firmly rounded', woman's breast with 'taut nipples poking the sky'. His novel Delhi is full of such descriptions and comparisons.

Thus we can see that Khushwant Singh has travelled a great distance from a Punjabi rustic to an educated westernized and cosmopolitan person. In this synthesis lies the extraordinary vigour and urbanity of his style, the down-to-earth worldliness, and visionary gleam of his art as a creative writer of great passion and power. His characteristic fictional mode is comic, which has obliged him to make various kinds of experiments with language.

38. Delhi, p. 166.