CHAPTER VII

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Khushwant Singh, primarily a social critic and journalist, gradually rose to be one of the finest Indian English novelists. His creative span, covers a period of over forty years – from the publication of his first collection of short stories *The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories* (1950) to the lastest published novel, *Delhi* (1989). Khushwant Singh's stories and novels, and his weekly columns such as "With Malice Towards One and All", "Malice Towards None", "Gossip Sweet and Sour" and "Above All This" and his pronouncements on the social, cultural and political conditions obtaining in the country give ample evidence of variety, vitality and social realism in his writings.

Singh has created a fictional world which is distinctly his own. As the formative years of his life were spent in the Punjab, he portrays Punjabi characters and Punjabi life with great minuteness, realism and authenticity. We get in his fiction convincing and credible accounts of social manners and customs, ideas and beliefs, trends and tendencies which are characteristic of common life in the Punjab. Most of his characters are modelled on people whom
he had actually known and met in life. He grew up in the Indo-Anglian atmosphere of New Delhi. His British education moulded his ideas, attitudes and outlook. He visited England, Japan, the United States, Canada and several African countries on various diplomatic assignments. As such his fiction is an outcome of his experience which is very rich and varied. Since Singh came from a very religious family, the influence of his religious scriptures can also be seen in his work. His view of religion is 'Ahimsa Paramo Dharmah', i.e. non-violence is a paramount religion. Although Sikhism seems to be the major creative impulse behind his novels, his approach to life is irreverential.

The influence of various contemporary writers — both British and Indian — can be seen in his writings. The impact of masters of the genre of fiction is discernible in his short stories too. He comes nearer to Dickens and Mark Twain in the facile use of the device of exaggeration to create comic appeal. "A Love Affair in London" is a Tolstoyesque story. Like the stories of O'Henry and Somerset Maugham, his stories have surprising endings. Singh shows affinity to Henry Fielding in the use of satire as an element to probe the various sores of Indian life. From the portrayal of some of the women characters in his fiction and from his free and frank treatment of sex, we can conclude that he has been influenced by modern English writers as well. The language and style he uses in his fiction make it quite obvious that the essential spirit of healthy virile
and realistic creative writings in Punjabi have greatly inspired him. In "A Punjab Pastorale" and "The Voice of God", Singh freely draws on the customs and idioms peculiar to the land of five rivers and hence they are rich in local colour. His novels—Train to Pakistan, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale and Delhi—clearly reveal that he was greatly affected by the socio-political upheavals of 1942, 1947 and 1984. Thus his faults and virtues as writer, novelist and artist partly derive from the various influences that have shaped his mind since childhood, through adulthood and in growing manhood.

As a writer of short stories, Singh has adhered to the O'Henry tradition of short-story writing. Singh's short stories have ingenious plots and are written more to entertain than to be taken seriously. He has about thirty-five short stories to his credit, published from time to time in collections, of 1950, 1957, 1967 and 1971. He got all of them published later in bookform in 1989 as The Collected Short Stories of Khushwant Singh. The first thing that strikes the eye in Singh's short stories is their infinite variety and width of range and scope. This variety may be found in their mode, manner as well as themes. Love, sex, religion, hypocrisy, bigotry, colonial consciousness, and universal experience and communalism are the dominant themes of his short stories. The main characteristics of these stories are wit and humour, vivacity and lightness of touch, urbane manner and cultivated style. Sometimes his
mood is comic or humorous and at other times satiric or ironic. He often combines humour and irony. The title, structure and meaning of his short stories like "The Mark of Vishnu", "Karma", and "The Voice of God" are marked both by verbal irony and irony of situation. Other stories with more of humour in them are: "The Interview", "A Punjab Pastorale", "The Morning After the Night Before", "The Insurance Agent", "Mr. Kanjoos and the Great Miracle", "The Convert", and "Mr. Singh and the Colour Bar". "A Bride for the Sahib" is a story which mixes irony with satire. Singh lays a rather heavy-handed satire on several aspects of modern Indian life, including bureaucracy, ("Man! How the Government of India Run!"), democratic election procedures ("The Voice of God"), and Anglicized Indian abroad (Mr. Kanjoos and the Great Miracle"). The uproarious force in "Maiden Voyage of the Jal Hindia" and "Rats and Cats in the House of Culture" is also typical of the author. His obsession with sex and colour may be noticed in stories such as "The Rape", "Black Jasmine" and "The Morning After the Night Before". The story "The Rape" and fictional sketch called "When Sikh Meets Sikh" have become classics now. He depicts an Indian scene with an uninhibited outspokenness that often embarrasses the sophisticated readers. In "The Mark of Vishnu", "The Memsahib of Mandla", and "Death Comes to Daulat Ram", we find him drawing upon the supernatural and folklore. "Posthumous" is a purely subjective story.

Singh starts his stories with an air of confidence,
and he entices the readers from the very beginning so that they settle down to watch his characters grow and the plot unfold. He mesmerises the readers with his engaging beginnings. Endings of the stories bring about a fitting finale to the contrived sequence of events. Singh consciously resorts to the brief ending with a twist or a surprise, like a sting in the tail. Singh's special fondness for the trick ending can be traced back to his journalistic writings at the beginning of his career.

As a social realist, Singh has portrayed characters in his short stories which contribute to their variety. They range from a poor farmer (Dalip Singh in "The Rape") to the greedy landlord (Ganda Singh in "The Voice of God"), from the vociferous clerk (Sunder Singh in "Man! How the Government of India Run!") to the proud barrister (Sir Mohan Lal in "Karma"), from the superstitious servant (Ganga Ram in "The Mark of Vishnu") to the highly Westernized Sahib (Mr. Sunny Sen in "A Bride for the Sahib"), and from the affectionate granny (the grand-mother in "The Portrait of a Lady") to the sour, hot-tempered housewife (Mrs. Sarla Sethi in "The Convert"). There are a number of stories in which the sharply contrasted characters help illuminate the central idea. These characters can be analysed on the basis of their social, regional, cultural and educational differences. The characters of Singh's short stories can be divided broadly into three categories – Englishmen, Wogs and Indians. The Englishmen are represented in the persons of
Mr. Tyson in "India is a strange Country", Peter Henson in "A Punjab Pastorale", and Stan Towers in "The Interview". The Wogs are represented in the characters of Sir Mohan Lal in "Karma", Mr. Sen in "A Bride for the Sahib", Sunder Singh in "Man! How the Government of India Run!", Charles in "The Butterfly", Dr. Chakkan Lal in "Maiden Voyage of the Jal Hindia". The native Indian characters, who belong to the soil of the Punjab, are Ganga Ram in "The Mark of Vishnu", Dalip Singh in "The Rape", Kusum in "Kusum", the religious hypocrites are presented in "The Great Difference", and Ram Jawaya and Ramzan in "The Riot". All these characters are life-like and they appear to be very real. The social characteristics such as likes, dislikes, love, hate, good, evil, happy, sorrow, fear, anger, friendship, enmity, true, false, life and death all are voiced and sun in abundance through artistic creation of characters in short stories.

Singh's novels present a fictional world peopled by a striking variety of characters covering a wide area of Indian socio-cultural and political scene. The socio-political beings are characterised with distinctive qualities in respect of variety and vitality. To individualize the characters and to establish them within the framework of social ethos Singh has used certain techniques in his novels — specially in Train to Pakistan and I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale. He has used: the devices of comparison and contrast and parallelism; gestures, manners and dialogues; the behaviour of characters placed in a critical situation.
and different points of view. He also uses characterization for exploring the central themes in his novels. The characters are distinctively divided into three categories: the Englishmen, the Wogs (Westernized oriental gentlemen) and the native Indians. Among the Indian novelists in English, it is perhaps Singh who gives us the most comprehensive picture of Englishmen in India during the colonical times.

In *Train to Pakistan*, Englishmen are totally absent perhaps because the novel deals with the post-independence India. Iqbal is the only Wog who may be called the mouthpiece of the novelist. Hukum Chand, the magistrate and Lambardar; Jugga, the budmash number ten; Iqbal, a Western educated youngman and a member of people's party of India; Nooran, a weaver's daughter - all these characters play an important role in the novel. Rest of the characters like Malli, a terrorist gangster; Bhai Meet Singh or Bhaiji, a Sikh priest; Imam Baksh, a muslim priest; Haseena, a muslim prostitute, are minor native personages who play only timely significant roles in the novel. In a sense, Mano Majra is the chief protagonist in *Train to Pakistan*. In *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, The Taylors - Mrs. Joyce Taylor and Mr. John Taylor - the two British people, are presented as the most sophisticated Englishmen. The Wogs come in for maximum criticism, for Western education has made them only poor imitators of the British ways of life and thought. Buta Singh comes under this group. The native Indians are
all characters like Sabbrai, Jhimma Singh, Sher Singh, Shunno, Mundoo, who are rooted in their native culture and are sincere in their respective roles, whether they stand for good or evil.

*Train to Pakistan* is the most simple form of prose fiction. It is a story of partition which records a succession of events. There is no hiatus between plot and character. Both are inseparably knit together. The qualities the novelist attributes to these characters determine the action, and the action in turn progressively changes the characters. Thus the story is carried forward to the end. Singh's stories have a definite beginning, a middle, and an end. The end of the novel is a solution to the problem which sets the events moving; it achieves that the completeness towards which the action has been moving and beyond which action cannot progress. Thus *Train to Pakistan* is a compact work of art in which unity of time, place and action have been well observed. The predominant quality of this novel is its stark realism. But critics consider this novel as a work of superior journalist rather than a creative writer or artist. The novelist himself seems to have admitted this fact. In spite of what critics say or Singh himself says, *Train to Pakistan* is a classic of its own kind. There is a fusion of poetry and politics, religion and social reform in the novel. It is this harmonious fusion and the tightly-packed symbolic structure as well as effective story-telling technique along with the
English language adopted so well as to communicate Indian modes of feeling and expression, that makes *Train to Pakistan* a fine novel of partition. Except perhaps the description of Monsoon, which is without any justification, there is no superfluity in the novel.

*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* is not so famous as his first novel. The theme of the novel once again hinges on love, sex, religion and death. Singh is intensely conscious of his social milieu and does not fail to reflect it effectively. He depicts the sordid realities of life by giving a tree account of relations within a sikh family. It is a thrilling story of a people emerging into Independence. The action of the novel takes place between April 1942 and April 1943. Singh proves that of all the resolutions open, it is love that resolves a crisis. Although dramalike, the novel is action-packed. The mode of presentation, construction of the plot, characterization, exposition of situation, climax and denoument of the novel—all point to the fact that the novel is entirely conventional. As in the first novel, Singh has used the element of contrast and parallelism in this novel too. Though the novel is eventful and full of thrill, it is loosely constructed. It does not show any organic development and lacks the quality of cohesion. The end, too, is hurried and dramatic. It suffers from inadequate unification of action, characterization and commentary.
Both the novels deal with a violent social and personal conflict. Only Jugga and Sabhrai come through unscathed in the test of human integrity; the others show a sense of values which is often compromised either by their situation or their convenience. Jugga has never thought of death, and he does not talk about it in the course of the story, because he is too full of life and vitality. But when he has to choose between his own death and that of Nooran, he does not hesitate in his decision. When he goes off to save that destined train, he is certain that there is no escape for him, he is not even concerned, like Iqbal, that his sacrifice will go unnoticed. He dies exactly the way he lives — full of confidence and vitality. Sabhrai finds the most important decision of her life more difficult, because it is not she who is expected to die, but her son, if he does not betray his companions. Yet finally it is she who pays for Sher Singh's return. The mother in her breaks down under the strain, and it appears right that she should die so that the materialistic world of Buta Singh and Sher Singh can go on.

After twenty years of their publication, Khushwant Singh in a weekly column stated candidly: "I have this unhealthy obsession with sex, religion and death".¹ Train to Pakistan and I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale exploit this obsession to its fullest extent, with the result that the main figures as well as the secondary ones, can be understood and defined in relation to these three concerns. Both Jugga

and Sabhrai are also illustrative of another important theme i.e. of martyrdom and human integrity, that is closely connected to the theme of human values: the only love and faith can provide the mental strength and conviction to accept death. Thus Love and Faith are the supreme values which the author wishes to project through the personalities of the dacoit Jugga in *Train to Pakistan* and the simple-minded Sabhrai in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Jugga and Sabhrai convey the final message of both the novels. As M. Tarinayya writes "an intensely human problem can be solved only by a change of heart, by an essentially moral and spiritual approach to it, and not by politicians, policemen, or soldiers". From the portrayal of some of the women characters in his fiction and from his free and frank treatment of sex, religion and death we can say that Khushwant Singh, as a social realist, has depicted vividly and pin-pointedly the darker social realities of life.

In the earlier two novels characterization is subservient to the dominant themes. But the characters in *Delhi* have predominance over the theme of the novel. In *Delhi* Singh shows the element of clear parallelism while portraying the characters of the city of Delhi and that of Bhagmati. There is absolutely no chastity in the life of Bhagmati and character of Delhi. They have been raped and plundered, used and misused by people belonging to different races, religions, castes and creeds. The characters may be

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divided into two groups: the oppressors, and the oppressed or sufferers. All the historical figures such as foreign invaders like Taimurlang, Nadir Shah and the rulers of Delhi from Babar to Bahadur Shah Zafar act as oppressors. All these rulers, except Aurangzeb, have wasted state treasury in abundance. The suppressed or sufferers are the common people who represent a cross-section of life of a particular period of time. Characters like Musaddi Lal Kayastha, Jaita Rangre, Meer Taqi Meer, Alice Aldwell and Nihal Singh come under this category. They do not belong to any particular religion. They change their religion as and when they face problems. On account of this hybrid nature of their character, both the Hindus and Muslims in society gave a wide birth to them. They are unusually exploited and misused by the moneyed people.

In Delhi, the author blends history and legend together. The events, situations and characters are all real and they have been portrayed in historical context. The novel is a blending of partly autobiographical and partly biographical elements. The first person narrative imparts an added charm of biography. The novel is in twenty-one chapters and excepting the first two chapters all others are arranged in such a way that each historical chapter is followed by a chapter entitled 'Bhagmati', which seeks to relate the past to the present, Singh follows this method to bring in remote historical incidents, and jumps from the earlier historical times to the present and vice
versa. The Delhi-Bhagmati parallelism assumes an overwhelming significance in binding different chapters into a perceptively coherent whole. In spite of the sincere efforts on the part of the novelist to connect the past and the present by the technique of parallelism, the novel sometimes gives the impression of being a collection of separate entities. Though in every chapter Singh makes an attempt at connecting the narrative, he has not always succeeded in doing so. There is a linear movement in the story, but the character is a bit mitigated by character-oriented close-up of events in the novel, its symbolism, parallelism and sudden transitions that we encounter in it.

In Delhi, Singh breaks new grounds and sincerely tries to paint on big canvas. But from the very beginning of the novel he does not seem to be sure of the technique. He seems to be a bit confused, as he himself states: "It took me twenty-five years to do so. I am not sure whether I have succeeded in my venture", and this confusion is writ large on the entire novel. Thus, it may be concluded that Singh's attempt at connecting the past and the present is not always a success. On the larger thematic plane, Bhagmati as a metaphor for Delhi is a sort of misconception. However, it cannot be denied that Bhagmati metaphor is Khushwant Singh's bold attempt at fusing the complex historical strands together. Whether he succeeds in his attempt remains questionable. In spite of his failure to artistically use the technique of symbolism thematically and

3. Delhi, A Note from the Author.
structurally, Khushwant Singh has made a sincere and bold attempt at writing a novel of epic dimensions.

No doubt Delhi is a highly readable book. But readability alone cannot be the sole criterion for a good novel. Having enjoyed reading it, we are tempted to ask many questions. Mohan Jha's has spelt out these questions.4 Khushwant Singh's assurance that he has nothing to do with propaganda should bring us the much needed 'mental relief', an escape from the welter of questions crowding in us. We should have no hesitation in treating Delhi as a plain and simple work of art, but the way he has given imaginative aura to the historical 'skeleton' by supplying 'flesh' and 'injecting blood and a lot of semi-fluid' makes things difficult for us assessing the novel. Lesser mortals may read it like a "Fucking Man's Guide to Delhi: past and present" but, says Khushwant Singh, "That is not what I mean it to be".5

Khushwant Singh assured the readers, that what he wanted was "to share with other people the emotion [this city] arouses" in him.6 Delhi has a strange fascination for Singh and thereby has produced an artistic expression of his 'love-hate affair' with the city. We can also look upon Delhi as a historical novel, but then this is no book of history. Singh had "to pick and choose episodes which tell

5. Delhi, p. 2.
the story [of Delhi] from 1008 A.D. up to the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and riots that followed which I decided would be the cut-off point.

The events, situations and characters are all real and they have been portrayed against the historical background.

Singh is a born story-teller, and he can narrate a tale grippingly and convincingly. Once we pick up his novels to read, we do not like to put them away unfinished. The narration is enlivened from time to time by flashes of humour which often results in uproarious laughter. Similarly, there are touches of pathos which move the heart of the readers. Singh has given absorbing narratives with an effective beginning and a clinching conclusion. The narration moves forward chronologically, taking both characters and environment into account. The action develops through interaction of characters and situation. Since Singh follows the conventional mode of narration, in which the author knows everything about each character, the end of the novels does not come as a surprise to us. The authorial comment, being ironic, has given a new dimension to all the three novels. It is only in Delhi that Singh has used a different technique. He has narrated the story of Delhi from two points of view: one from that of the omniscient author, and the other from that of the characters on the spot.

Being a highly skilled narrator of events, Singh employs a variety of narrative techniques in his fiction, exploiting fully the devices of contrast and balance and suspense and surprise. In all the stories the narration is direct and straightforward. As the narrative proceeds the author allows the reader's evaluation to spring out naturally from an indirect dramatic presentation of characters and situations. As a short-story writer, Singh has far excelled so many other Indian English novelists in craftsmanship. His presentation of the vast panorama of Indian life is really impressive.

In the narrative portions of his fiction Singh's English is spiked with wit, humour, irony and satire. He makes his British characters speak in an entirely convincing way. But the dialogues his native characters speak are permeated by a variety of colourful Indianism. His experiments in style and diction are limited to the dialogue of his characters. Swear or abuse words, smelling of the rustic soil of the Punjab, are plentiful in Singh's fiction. They become, however, a serious fault because of their over-abundance, and expose Singh to the charge of vulgarity. Literal translations and transliterations of Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi idioms and proverbs into English add yet another spicy note. Symbolism and imagery, which are plentiful in Singh's novel, add to the vitality of his plots. His use of imagery, simile, metaphor and symbolism reveals his natural awareness and his response to life. His prose is
characterized by its flow of easy language. Although Singh uses uncommon words, his straightforward narration is the hallmark of his fiction. Throughout his career, he has steadily evoked a style that is recognisably his own.

Singh's art of narration, technique of characterization, his realistic comic approach to life, his courage and determination to attack all rigid conventions of religion, love, sex and morals, and his exposition of the stark reality with a frankness and openness of mind, and above all, his enviable command of language which he uses with ease and naturalness are some of the important traits which assure him a permanent niche in the galaxy of Indian English novelists. His minute observation of men, women, manners and places, which appears regularly in newspapers' columns, proves that his interest in ordinary human beings and their predicament remains unabated.