Interview with Khushwant Singh by the Researcher on 08/08/1994 at Khushwant Singh's residence in New Delhi:

Researcher:
Sir, you are a much talked about writer in India today. Can we know what aspect of your writing made you so?

Khushwant Singh:
Basically it is my columns appearing in different papers - not the books that I have written - columns I started writing with the Illustrated weekly.

Even now I am doing this every week. They are all syndicated in different papers and papers in different languages as well -- translated in different regional languages. There is a main column which appears in the Hindustan Times -- "With Malice to One and All". Then there is another one appearing in the Tribune of Chandigarh called "This Above All". There is another one in The Week. Then the weekly column for the new paper Asian Age which appears every Saturday. "Men and Women in My Life" - That is a profile. I also do so many
articles for foreign papers and Indian journals. It is a very killing piece of work. Inevitably after so much have appeared, people get to know because it appears in all languages.

Wherever I go in India -- they have read me either in English or in their own regional languages. That I think is the main reason for my popularity. Because of that, any book I write gets talked about straight away. For instance, the novel Delhi even before the first copy has arrived in the book stall, three editions have been printed. This has nothing to do with the merit of the novel. It is just that people are curious.

I think by this winter my autobiography will come out and whatever it be -- good, bad or indifferent -- already contracts have been signed for Marathi, Bengali, Hindi and Tamil. I don't claim any great quality in writing. I think I am able to communicate with my readers. I can write simple language. I think that is the only strength I have.

R.: You have a rich sense of humour. How did you acquire this speciality?
K.S.: You know most writers have struggled to come up. They come from poor background from villages. And so their main concern is poverty. Struggle for life is tragedy. But I was
spared from all that. I came from a well-to-do family. And I lived a lot of my years in England as a student and later as a diplomat.

It was the English sense of humour which perhaps I acquired from King's College - that really attracted me. It must have come because of my long association with the English people and English writings -- contemporary English writings. Owing to the constant exposure to the English sense of humour, it becomes a part of your system. And love for gossip which I inherited from my mother. She was a great gossip.

R.: You have often said that Indians are lacking in humour. Could you please explain this?

K.S.: That is right. The reason is this. The struggle for life is so bitter and there is not much room left for humour. And you do get some kind of black humour. But it is very stark. There is very little subtlety in whatever is humourous. I, for instance, read stories said to be humourous by Birbal or Tenali Raman or Gopal Khan (Bengali). I don't find them funny. I just don't see why Indians should laugh at them. They seem to me very simple and silly stories. There is no sophistication in their sense of humour.
R.: You are from a God-fearing family. Again you have said, till you were 40 you were religious. Then how did you become an agnostic all on a sudden? Is there any specific event which resulted in your transition from faith to agnosticism?

K.S.: No, not all on a sudden. I gradually became an agnostic. Just arguing, talking, finding the futility of religious rituals which are the integral part of any Indian home. And I found it so meaningless.

For instance, among the Sikhs we have the ceremony called the "Akkand Paaths" - non-stop reading of the Granth. Readers do it by the relay. It takes two days and nights. So you have five or six readers and all night chanting while all the family is fast asleep. It is supposed to bring some kind of mercy. In many cases 99 out of 100 don't even understand what you read. No one bothers to find out the meaning. Now these rituals didn't make any sense to me. I cannot really understand an educated person doing this. Whenever he is in trouble or he wants something to happen, he immediately organises an "Akkand Paaths" in his home.

I find it even more silly in other communities. Down South you have to pay so much money to get even Dharshan of the God. Everywhere we are in the hands of the priestly class which has vested interests -- in all our religions. You go to any place of pilgrimage -- Haj or Varanasi or
Bhubaneshwar -- They almost strip you off your clothes. In any case, the basic question is what Adi Sankara posed: Where do we come from? Why? Where do we go when we die? No religious system has answered these.

All the stories of rebirth are childish fantasies. All these stories of the day of judgement which are essential to the Islamic and Christian faith - are nothing but just fantasy.

And the rebirth is as much a fantasy as anything else. And I remember a dialogue I had with Dalai Lama. I told him "You know I don't believe in God." He laughed and said, "Do I? I am a Buddhist." "I don't believe in God because Buddhists and Jains strictly don't really believe in God". I said, "But you believe in reincarnation".

He said, "I do."

I said, "Have you any scientific proof for rebirth?" He tried to tell me little stories about children who remember their previous births.

I said, "Your holiness will agree that these are childish fantasies. It is strange that no Muslim child ever remembers previous birth." "It is always a Hindu or a Sikh who have been brought up in this tradition".

He laughed and said, "If I don't believe in reincarnation, I will be out of business." It was an honest reply.
I'll tell you another interesting anecdote. Raj Mohan Gandhi — you know Gandhi's grandson and Rajagopala Achari's grandson-in-law. He was the Editor of the Indian Express in Madras for some years and he published one of my articles — "Why I have been an agnostic." I had written about why I didn't believe in God because I didn't know the beginning or the end or what happens after our death.

I got a letter from his twelve year old daughter called Supria — I was then in Washington:

"Dear Uncle,

I read your article in Daddy's paper — You don't believe in God. You are wrong. God comes to our home everyday. He talks to my daddy — he talks to my mummy. He talks to my brother — and he talks to me. So there is God."

So I wrote back: Dear Supria,

I am so glad that God comes to your home everyday and he talks to you, to your mummy, to your daddy — to your brother — But he doesn't talk to me. Will you please send him my telephone number?

I met Raj Mohan and his wife the other day. The girl is now 16, and completely agnostic.

So you know it is a series of questioning and it has nothing to do with being a good person. Whether you believe in God or not it makes no difference to your being a good human being.
R.: Religion is expected to bring unity among people. But in the novel *Train to Pakistan* it has miserably failed. Even today, your novel has become all the more relevant after the Ayodyah incident. As critic I make two observations:

1) History repeats itself

2) A great work of art has stood the test of time.

Which of the two observations do you approve of?

K.S.: History doesn't repeat itself. I think it has become a saying which has no meaning. I don't know how and where history repeats itself. Everything is new under new circumstances. Some people who are a little more impressed make clippings and compile them and they come and show them to me. Some have preserved nearly 40 years of my writings which they have clipped and compiled together and I get a sense of satisfaction -- There are some people who think that they are worth keeping.

Time is another factor - some are immortal - works of Shakespeare, Milton and Kalidasa - These are immortal works. They will go on and on - being read for centuries to come. Nothing better is written. Others are ephemeral phenomenon; ten years later nobody even remembers the name of the author.

If I am read 50 years from now I will say that that work was a success. Most of the stuff I write, I don't remember not even the next day.
R.: In the novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, the title is catchy. Could you please throw some light on this?

K.S.: Well—I make a curious fetish. I never give a title to a book till I finish the book. I have a belief that if you think of the title first, you never write the book. I know many friends who start with the title but don’t get anywhere. I think I get the lines from Christina Georgina Rossetti:

When I am dead, my dearest,
   Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
   Nor shady cypress tree;
Be the green grass above me
   With showers and dew drops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
   And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,
   I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
   Sing on as if in pain:
And dreaming through the twilight
   That doth not rise or set,
Haply I may remember,
   And haply may forget.
So I took that line from this poem. The bull bull will not sing all the time. You hear it in your youth and then it goes. The novel is really a family story. It is all built on actual incident -- the Quit India Movement. Well. One of my brothers was involved and arrested at a time when my father was expecting to be Knighted. He knew nothing about it till he was informed. In that sense it was an autobiography. I've made it in a different setting.

The hero of that story really was my father. He was told by the Chief Commissioner of Delhi that they had to arrest my brother. If he tells them who the people were with him - because he bought a teleprinter or something to give to the underground people - People like Mrs. Asaf Ali and others who were underground at that time. If he gives the names of his collaborators, they will release him. With my father the choice was either he gets the Knighthood or he would not get it. But he weighed the pros and cons. When he was allowed to see my brother he said, "Look, what you have done, has done me enough damage. But now, if you mention the name of your collaborators don't come back to my home".

In the novel, I gave this credit to my mother - actually it was my father and nevertheless he was knighted.

The English Commissioner realised the family difficulties and he said why should I deprive this man of his honour, for
what his son had done. So the story is woven around that. But again the English character is a real man whom I knew. The English have that—you know that sense of fairness. They won't damn a whole family for what one person has done.

R.: You have often laughed at women. But I feel that in these two novels Train to Pakistan and I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale it is the women characters who really represent the authorial/commonsensical point of view. For instance, in Train to Pakistan it is the dancing girl (Haseena) who suddenly acquires a motherly dimension and even plays the role of the mother to Hukum Chand. Similarly, in I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale the mother character is commonsensical and advises her son Shersingh not to reveal the name of the co-conspirators.

Could you please comment on this?

K.S.: Well. I am convinced that the woman is the stronger character. The female sex is stronger and therefore these two characters are more impressive—both, one a prostitute and the other mother character. The mother image that I have taken is really was from my mother-in-law—a very strong character. She went through an abdominal surgery without anesthesia. She got one of the assistants a Sikh— to tell her prayers loudly. She did not squirm. That kind of strong women do exist—though they are called weaker sex.
E.: Is feminism possible in India?

Is it possible that there are some feminist features in your writings?

K.S.: You mean Women Liberation Movement -- taking place in India. We are hundreds of Indias. The Anglised Indians do exactly like any European or American. They talk wide. They drink. They do all kinds of things. They live without being married. Some even have children without being married. Then you have the middle class which is very orthodox and very conservative. So you cannot pass a blanket judgement in India. This will go on in one section. Things will happen which will keep pace with what is happening in the West -- and others will remain centuries behind. They still have arranged marriages.

Look at the matrimonial ads - you hardly believe that young women accept it. You see, young women, girls coming out of college give in. Their marriages are arranged. Infact, they don't seem to mind. They think that after all nothing is unusual. But I ask them; "You are educated. Why don't you find your own husband? Why don't you make your own mistake? If the marriage goes wrong, you don't have to blame your parents - you have to blame yourself. And try again, if it doesn't work, divorce the man. Try again".

But you know, the weight of the past is so heavy. They continue to toe the line.
R.: I feel that your way of joking is to tell the truth. But in both *Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* this sense of humour is missing. Why?

K.S.: Well, both the themes didn't lend themselves to much humour. There is a little amount of wit in the communist character -- Iqbal in *Train to Pakistan*. Both themes, one you know is the struggle for Independence and the other is the tragedy of Partition. But there is enough of it in Delhi -- both humour and whatever one could put in, I've done, trying to combine the tragedy with humour. For instance, the last scene in Delhi -- They are again real characters and real incidents. It is a good instance of blending of humour and pathos.

You read about a man who knew nothing of Indira Gandhi but calling her a bitch because of the Golden Temple issue. Chapita was slightly mad. Yet my father was so kind that he kept him in service till the day he died. He was 40 years in service -- because he came from our village. We looked after him. He used to get these bouts of fits of insanity. When he thinks of his old days in the army. It is very embarrassing. There were moments he took to attention and saluted you and marched like a soldier. Even such comic characters, I was able to create. It depends on the theme which you are handling.
In the novel Delhi the narrator says:
I have two passions in my life;
my city Delhi and Bhagmathi.
They have two things in common.
They are lots of fun,
And they are sterile.

Does the narrator represent your point of view?

K.S.: Yes, quite obviously. And I chose a hermaphrodite as a character because it is a sterile character. It cannot produce and the same with Delhi. Apart from one or two poets the city has not really produced any great figure. After all it is the capital of India for centuries and yet the output in the way of great artists, great musicians, great literature is very little. So I thought this would be a fairly good symbolic representation of the city.

R.: You claim that Delhi is a novel. But structurally and technically it is not a novel. It is anecdotal and fragmentary, How do you explain this?

K.S.: You know it is really historical. Every chapter is based on facts of history. I got memoirs about people from people I met. I mean for instance the chapters on mutiny. I read through the entire proceedings of Bhagadur Shah and took the characters from those tribes—people who appeared against him in their own defence. Then I mixed it up with
poetry. They are all real people. But they are also fictional, because what I added on to them is fiction. The book is entirely based on memoirs.

R.: Your thought provoking essay recommends a new religion based on reason and science. Are you able to practise the new religion? Have you got any positive reaction for the new idea?

K.S.: Oh - a lot.

Even in Madras when it first appeared, several college girls came to see me.

This is the most thought provoking essay because you know I tried to bring my concept of religion to the present problem. There was a time when there was a lot of space - lot of shortage of people - justified to multiply. Now the problem is how to stop that multiplication. So I have suggested, "Make family planning a part of the religious vow because religion has such a strong hold." I said, "Stop the cremation of the dead with wood. And make burial compulsory, that too in the standing position, so that no land is wasted." All these sanyasis do nothing - except giving long meaningless sermons to every one else. All this practice of meditating is wasting hours - sitting down and doing nothing and talking about finding inner peace. I said what the hell you are getting out of inner peace? It produces nothing.
Make religion work oriented. The country needs more people to work. And cut down holidays. Every third day is a holiday in India.

I am told it needs religious sanctions to make these things effective -- environment, population control. In every marriage the couple should take a vow in front of the priest and the congregation that they will not have more than one child. And on the birth of the second child they'll submit themselves to sterilization.

R.: You have stated - "I am not proud of being an Indian" -- And again you say -- "This is my native land -- I don't like it but I love it" -- Could you please explain your maxim: "I don't like it; but I love it"?

K.S.: You know living here is so uncomfortable compared to foreign countries. There anywhere you go, you press the switch, light comes on; you open a tap, water runs out. Here, you can't take anything for granted. Life is so difficult, unpleasant. People are so loud; people are so aggressive, self centred, selfish. You see the traffic. Everyone wants to push ahead, it doesn't matter whether he blocks the road for hundred other people.

At any railway platform, you see, before the passengers can get out, other people are thrusting their way in; total lack
of consideration. Living is in some way extremely unpleasant; but, the sense of belonging -- I don't have the sense of belonging living in Europe or United States where I had been many years and lived in great comfort, of course everything is provided for there. Everything is worse here practically nothing worth here; yet the sense of belonging is here.

R.: You have said that English is your mother tongue. In which language do you think? Supposing you have a dream, in which language do you dream?
K.S.: In English.
Well, my mother tongue is English -- although my mother cannot speak a single English word.
No you don't need a language for dreaming.
There is not much dialogue in dream. It is quite possible that if I dream of my mother I obviously will be talking to her in Punjabi. You know English is the richer language -- richer than any other Indian languages. Much larger vocabulary. You know I was taxed by the Hindi Press for having said that all our languages are very poor in vocabulary and some Hindi writer took it up and said that I had called Hindi a Darithra Pasha and that anyone who accuses his mother tongue of being poor was accusing her of being a prostitute. And I said, I don't understand
the logic. It is common sense that we are poor in our languages. We don't have vocabulary in technology, science, medicine, nature, diplomacy, anything—it all has to be taken from English or something else. And I said I am pleading that you have to build up vocabulary and fortunately I found an article written by Prof. Varma, Head of the Department of Hindi at Allahabad—who is regarded the greatest authority in Hindi and he said exactly what I had said. He mentioned, 'red colour' as an example; he listed twenty variations of red colour in English—you know crimson, vermilion and like that and Hindi has only two either lal or kulabi either red or pink. He said it is a great challenge to the poet and the writer. He has the thoughts coming up. He does not have the means of expressing them because the vocabulary is not there. So I quoted this, and silenced my critics. And I am sure we don't have two words in Hindi to distinguish a rat from a mouse. I don't know whether in Tamil you have different words for the size of the rats. In English they have. We don't have a word for sea-gull, for example. We have the enormous sea coast with at least twenty varieties of sea gulls. We don't have distinction between snow and ice. Innumerable incidents like this I can give you.
R.: What is the secret of your youthfulness and health?
K.S.: The head dyed; beard dyed.

Well, I am very disciplined in my routine. Although my eyes are very poor now. I still read every morning and watch my diet. You can't do any work unless you are physically fit.

R.: I am quoting from your story "The Voice of God". "The people had spoken. The voice of the people is the voice of God." -- Are you disillusioned with democracy in India? Or Is the agnostic in you speaking?
K.S.: Yea, of course, that time I was disillusioned.
During British time elections were more rigged than they are now. If they wanted some candidate to win they took good care that he won.

R.: Have you read The Apple Cart by Shaw? Would you prefer a "benevolent dictator" to India as Shaw at one stage did?
K.S.: No, I haven't read Shaw. But sometimes one would prefer a benevolent dictator. I think Pakistan went ahead much faster during the time of Ayubkhan because he was a dictator and benevolent one. He didn't give people much rights. If they transgressed even slightly they would be in trouble. I am sure that would not be a bad thing for a little while. That is why I supported Sanjay Gandhi who was not the legal authority but he was a man who did tremendous things from a
sociological point of view, though his methods were undemocratic. For instance, I think, he wrongly tried to impose family planning by making it compulsory which made him highly unpopular among the tradition-bound people. In a sense I supported emergency initially. You know Jeyaprakash for whom I had great admiration. I wrote to him then, when he started his movement to gheroe legislatures -- I said: "This is against the rule - you elect people - you allow them to function. I think when you surround legislatures and stop MLAs attending assemblies, you are wrong". When he started his movement he even asked the army to disobey orders. So I said you know there are limits beyond which you cannot revolt against society. There are plenty of other things you can object to -- but this -- no. And he wrote to me: And I published the letter in full in the Illustrated Weekly when he replied with his signature under the letter; but I supported the Emergency when it was imposed. We invited it on our head. Except the shackling of the press, it brought a lot of good. I protested the bill. Later on I became critical because it was grossly misused. For instance, if the Deputy Commissioner didn't like any one, he had him locked up and that kind of misuse became rampant at a later stage.
R.: In the short story "The Rape" when the girl was asked by the magistrate whether she had gone to the accused of her free will, she answers - Yes. Will any Indian girl give such a public confession? Is Bindo telling the truth?

K.S.: Oh yes, in fact it is a true story. I was a criminal lawyer. Well, that would have been a battle for her. She knew that she would never be accepted back in her family. They won't be able to find a husband. She must have also felt that this fellow must have liked her too and hence the statement in the court.

R.: In your history books on Sikhs, how far were you able to keep the aesthetic distance? (Objectivity)

K.S.: It has to be -- well, the opening passages are descriptive, lyrical of the Punjab. Punjab is not a beautiful countryside. Yet for anyone who belongs, it has emotional value. And also, in a sense, my main theme has been building of a kind of Punjabi Nationalism irrespective of the fact that you are a Hindu or Muslim or Sikh and subsequently after Partition whatever I have written of the Punjab has been interpreted as a battle ground between the Hindu and the Sikhs -- by Binderanwale and others.
R.: Is it not a sense of alienation that forces the Sikhs to ask for Khalistan?

K.S.: I have been writing strongly against -- denouncing the demand for Khalistan, because basically I feel that any demand which does damage to the country must be opposed. That is why I opposed the Khalistan. I opposed ULFA and all these movements, you don't exaggerate your grievances. For Assamese, one grouse is that they produce all the tea. They produce much of the oil and instead of being it floated back, it is taken out. I think Punjab can say the same thing. We produce more wheat and rice. It is acquired by the Government at fixed price and given to people. I think we all have to accept, Bombay pays more than 50% of the entire Income Tax of the country. More than 50% of the revenue from excise and customs come from Bombay. Now they could very well say that we collected, we paid - we'll spend it in Marathi. That kind of logic cannot succeed. You are one country. You have to see the interests of the other parts of the country.

R.: Don't the people have the right to ask for homeland?

K.S.: Well, if you make a logical case, if there is such a thing, I would say all right. If they want to break away from us, they can break away. But I don't think that there has been any movement of that kind - what happened to
Dravidastan - Nothing. They have gone into thin air. Nobody talks of Dravidastan anymore. Khalistan never had the support of the Sikh community. There are only a few headstrong lunatics who get docks abroad - living in England -- Canada -- They never had roots here. I tried to talk to the supporters of Khalistan. I said, you draw me a map of Khalistan; where will it be and what will be the communal proportion? They refused to draw me a map. Then I said - All right - you get Khalistan. It is entirely an agricultural state. Where will you sell your produce? India or Pakistan. There is no third option.

You may be very angry with the Government. You say they destroyed our temple. They killed our people after Mrs. Gandhi's murder. I agree with you. You have grievances and many people have grievances. But you don't go further and say I am going to smash the country. Your anger must find proper channel. You know it is like cutting your nose to spite your face.

R.: Nirad C. Chaudhuri, though an Indian, felt like an alien in his own country. You are a great admirer of this scholar extraordinary. Do you feel the same way as he felt?

K.S.: Well, if you really read him carefully, he is really more Indian than any other Indian I know. If he feels angry with India, he has every right to be so because the idea is that things are so wretched here. And I think, of course.
What I admire most is the way he handles the English language. Believe it or not, he has strong attachment to Bengal.

R.: I have come from Tamil Nadu. I feel an alien in Delhi though it is the capital of India. Haven't you felt like that in any part of India?

K.S.: Your problem is you don't know Hindi. I just come from Guwahati yesterday -- speaking Assamese, dressing differently, eating differently. You know you are not an alien. But I don't feel at all alienated.

It is not like for instance being in Europe. There everyone looks at you. In no part of India I felt like this except in little villages where they haven't seen a Sikh. You get little boys running round and behind him out of curiosity. But I never felt the sense of being an outsider.

R.: Not even during Operation Bluestar...

K.S.: Then I did. For the first time I felt discriminated. I said that it was a calculated slap in the face of the entire community, even more, when the killing took place after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination, where you know Sikhs were hunted. They were burnt alive — who had nothing to do with the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. Properties destroyed and
the police looking on and most of the rich Sikhs moved into five star-hotels. I was taken away to the Sweedish Embassy. And there you felt a refuge in your own homeland.

R.: Then how did you reconcile to this?
K.S.: I thought a nightmare has passed. Then I thought of a large number of Hindus who came to the help of the Sikhs. Again these fellows are not anti-Sikhs. They are after their property. The Sikhs are better off. They were looking for T.V. sets and things like that -- killing the Sikhs for fun and game to give some legitimacy to what they were doing -- otherwise they were after their property and they were all organised by the Congress Party. There is not the slightest doubt that it was organised and yet in many localities, the Hindus stood out and stopped and said that we would not allow that. You have to remember that too - I mean people like Atal Bihari Vajpayee lying sick in bed ran out of the house to save some taxi drivers and I wrote about it and made people ashamed of that.

R.: So you felt like an alien at the time of Bluestar Operation.
K.S.: Yes, it was a temporary phenomenon and I who have otherwise no religious feelings felt a strong sense of identity. I felt I must reaffirm my identity as a Sikh. That
is why I was the first to protest. I returned my Padma Bhushan.

R.: Did you have any sense of fear?

K.S.: No. And I paid Mrs. Gandhi the most handsome tribute when she was assassinated. She had no communal feelings and I said she made a mistake -- an error of judgement ordering the Bluestar Operation.

R.: You say -- I am Indian, Punjabi and Sikh. Is it true that you feel in the same order? Does not your statement echo some kind of an identify crisis?

K.S.: Yah -- Not really -- I mean -- Let me put it like this. If I see a Sikh team playing a non-sikh team obviously I want the Sikh team to win. It gives me pleasure, joy to see a Sikh athlete do well or Siddu hits a sixer -- everytime it gives more pleasure to see that happens. But it does never go beyond that.