CHAPTER III

TALES WITH A STING

The only literary form which had its roots in tradition, and could avail itself of the vast opportunities opened up by printing and the rapidly increasing demand for literature, was the short-story. ("On the Short Story," The Collected Short Stories of Khushwant Singh ix)

The unmistakable voice of Khushwant Singh the artist is distinctly heard in his short-stories. He earned great reputation as a short story writer with the publication of The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories in 1950. As an individualist to the core, he offers a definition of the short-story, based on to his own conception.

A glance at the origin and growth of short-story as a genre, will be throwing more light on the tradition, and the individuality of Khushwant Singh as a writer. Hence a brief survey is attempted. A few definitions are in vogue in terms of length and structure. A few other definitions are reader-oriented, talking in terms of effect. A few more definitions are theme-oriented. They are all briefly discussed with a view to explaining the tradition and individuality in Khushwant Singh's definition of a short-story.
Over the last 150 years the short story has come to figure conspicuously in the literature of several countries. But it is not a modern invention and it must have existed thousands of years before the art of writing was known. The birth-tales of the Jataka, the fables of the Panchatantra and of Aesop, the stories of Daniel, Jonah and Ruth in the Old Testament and the Parables of the New Testament, Apuleus' story of Cupid and Psyche, the bawdy tales of the Gesta Romanorum, the Arabian Nights and the Decameron are, in one sense, short-stories. In another sense, the term -- short story -- is less inclusive; a distinction is made between the folk tale, fable, parable etc., and the carefully contrived literary form known as the short story.

The short-story as a distinct literary form began to attract the attention of serious writers in large numbers from the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the United States the publication of Irving's "The Sketch Book" in 1819 marked the beginning of a long tradition of the American Short Story. "Rip Van Winkle" one of the tales in that collection is regarded as the first American short story. The magazines provided the publishing outlet for Hawthorne and Poe.

Reviewing some of Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction in 1842, Edgar Allan Poe asserted that the chief formal
property of "the short prose tales" was "unity of impression" which he regarded as a product of conscious artistry. But Poe's tales of effect lacked a moral ingredient; and Hawthorne and Melville added it to the short story.

In France, Marimee, Balzac and Gauter established the art of short story in 1829-31 with the magazine publication of a dozen contes. They based their work on realism and emphasised such clarity of observation, vividness of detail and precision of statement that the incidents reveal the meaning of the work implicitly and the writer remains impersonal and objective.

In the nineteenth century two different approaches to the short story appeared; Poe laid stress on "total effect" and Turgenev on "character." This basic distinction could be seen again in the French writer Guy de Maupassant and in the Russian writer Chekov in the beginning of the twentieth century. Maupassant mastered the method of Poe and Chekov, like Turgenev, focused on revealing moments in the lives of his characters.

In England the masters of the English novel -- Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy -- occasionally attempted short stories.
However during the 1880's the influence of American writers like Irving, Poe, Bret Harte and Ambrose Bierce began to be felt in the romances and fantasies of R.L.Stevenson and Oscar Wilde. In the late nineteenth century, Henry James wrote realistic stories with an organic form, character determining incidents and incidents illustrating character in a firm style. In the twentieth century it was in Rudyard Kipling that the short story in England found a talent comparable to Maupassant in France. Kipling's stories dealt with striking incidents of British colonial life. The major novelists like Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, E.M.Forster, Virginia Woolf and D.H.Lawrence showed an awareness of the short-story form. W.Somerset Maugham dominated the English short story writing almost half of the twentieth century. He deftly transmuted the incidents of ordinary life into classic art, depicting psychological conflict and incisive dissection of human frailties. A later generation of writers -- V.S.Pritchett, H.E.Bates, Graham Greene and Elizabeth Bower -- has demonstrated that the short story in England reached maturity by the middle of the twentieth century.

In The Philosophy of the Short Story (1901) Brander Matthews declared that symmetry of design was the sine qua non of the short story. By implication this means that a short story must have a plot; and the narrative structure is
always derived from conflict, sequential action and resolution. Similarly Somerset Maugham has said that Aristotle's dictum about the need for a beginning, a middle and an end applies to the short story as well. But another argument is that the action of the short story need not have a completed pattern at all. A short story may be virtually without start or finish, it will represent only a state of affairs rather than a sequence of events. This is generally true of the work of many writers. The stories of Galsworthy and Chekhov have only "the middle." Thus in discarding patterns of enclosure the story writer can perhaps discover a freedom and imaginative truth inherent in this genre.

Although a few writers like Somerset Maugham preferred to end their stories with a full-stop rather than with the straggle of dots, there has been a growing tendency during the present century for short stories to be "all middle." This helps the writer to avoid structural complications in general and terminal climaxes in particular. And this inconclusiveness becomes a unique principle of structure. In this context Ian Reid observes:

This kind of narrative, open at both ends, frequently centres on a certain character-type: the bird-of-passage figure whose significance depends on the fact that his
Over the years it has become obvious that a kind of revolution has taken place in the concept of the short story. Definitions have been either modified or defied to suit the requirement of the changing times.

The genesis of the Indian short story can be traced to the Puranas, Jataka tales and the Panchatantra. The Indian fable and the Indian tale have helped the Indian short-story writer in English in giving his stories a definite shape. The Indian writer in English also came under the influence of the short-story writers of the West to a considerable extent. The Maupassant tradition reached the Indian short story writer in English through the translations of the stories of Maupassant and also through writers like O. Henry, Galsworthy and Maugham. Moreover, the Maupassant short-story has certain basic qualities of the ancient Indian tale -- uninterrupted narration, preservation of curiosity and the resulting clear picture of life. As H.E. Bates puts it,

Maupassant rather tended to fill in the picture.... In consequence, he is more direct; the colours are filled in; his points are clearly made; The reader is left far less
The Nationalist movement created an awareness in the minds of the Indian writers to be proud of their motherland. The Indian writer wanted to convey the sense of pride to the people here and abroad. In short, to present an overall satisfying and unifying picture of India through a general observation of men and the land has been the dominant motive behind every Indian English short story writer. By blending features of the ancient Indian fable and tale with the Maupassant tradition, he has evolved a form which has helped him to tell what he wanted to say in a direct way and establish a quick rapport with the reader. Mulk Raj Anand's attitude may easily be the attitude of any contemporary Indian English writer who wants to create,

... a new kind of fable which extends the old Indian story form into a new age, without the overt moral lessons of the ancient Indian short stories, but embodying its verve and vitality and including the psychological understanding of the contemporary period. (qtd. in C.V.Venugopal 46)

The growth and popularity of journals in the first half of this century encouraged many an Indian short story writer
to make his mark. But the experimentation with technique was not the Indian storyteller’s priority. For the Indian writer unlike the British or the American writer had to face certain challenging problems in his use of the English language; he found it extremely difficult to translate the Indian idiom into English with ease. This is perhaps, one of the reasons why even the leading writers like Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan did not feel the Western impact on them in terms of technique. This view is reflected in Raja Rao’s statement:

I think I am interested in making the English language yield to the Indian needs. And that is a very hard task both in terms of rhythm and associated values. (Indian and Foreign Review 12)

Even with regard to theme, the Indian writer was more interested in creating a convincing picture of contemporary India in its various aspects—social, economic and political; he did not throw light on the individual in his private and personal predicaments. The protagonist in the Indian short story in English performs the function of a type rather than of the individual representing a class or an institution or a prevailing social condition. Raja Rao’s Javni represents the pathetic predicament of the untouchable, Anand’s Dhandu represents the poor who are
exploited mercilessly in an industrialized society and R.K. Narayan's Rajam Iyer, a typical traveller in a third class compartment of the Indian Railways.

Mostly the Indian short story in English has been written in three different periods of Indian history namely the period of political awakening, the pre-Independence period and the post-Independence period. Even at the time of political awakening, the Indian short story writer in English maintained his equanimity. He neither over-exhibited his attachment to his motherland nor gave any hint of rancour against the British. And Independence ironically brought along with it disillusionment. So he presents a realistic portrayal of India in its beauty as well as ugliness.

The thirties and forties saw a great leap forward in the short story form. That was the period when great writers like Anand, Narayan and Raja Rao appeared on the scene. With their stories, the reformist and the realistic narration acquired new dimensions. For the first time, attempts at probing states of minds both individual and social were made. Art, social commitment and human study went hand in hand. Anand's "The Barber's Trade Union" Isvaran's "No Anklet bells for Her" Narayan's "Iswaran" and Raja Rao's "Akkaya" are examples for the stories with a new dimension.
The post-Independence period has seen the advent of a number of short story writers articulating their impressions of current topics: Independence and its aftermath, East-West relationship, and the alienated individual. Prominent among them have been Khushwant Singh, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Jhabvala, Arun Joshi, Anita Desai, Khwaja Ahmed Abbas and a few others. In the post-Independence era there is a feeling of unhappiness because of the fairly widespread social injustice, rampant corruption, and political duplicity. The feeling of disillusionment generally overshadows the progress that has been achieved in the country. The conflict that has been going on between modernity and tradition, science and religion, fact and superstition hinders the march of the country towards progress. The social scene has of course had its impact on the domestic scene. The proverbial sweet home does occasionally turn bitter and uninhabitable.

In this background Khushwant Singh made his mark as a short-story writer in 1950 when his first collection, The Mark of Vishnu was published. He pursues the art of the short story in its early twentieth century narrative form. All the available definitions did not satisfy him. Maybe he reacts to the Western definitions as an Indian and his reservation about the Indian folk tales may be attributed to his Western education and life. In this connection Shahane
observes:

His [Khushwant Singh's] stories reveal a distinctive narrative structure and an almost traditional development of the plot which recalls, and approximates, the early phase of the Italian novella or German novellum. (Khushwant Singh 32)

Khushwant Singh in his essay "On the Short Story" prescribes rules for any writer who wishes to express his thoughts in a short story. His first guideline is in terms of length.

... a short story must in fact be short. It cannot be a short novel, any more than a novel can be a long short story.... A novel is on a large canvas, a story is like a miniature painting. Personally, I would fix 3500 words as the outside limit for a short story. (The Collected Short Stories xii)

His second priority goes to the plot structure:

... a short story must be built around one incident or a series of incidents illustrating one theme or portraying one character or the equation between that one character and others. (xii)
Finally he insists on the punch which will have long lasting effect on the reader:

... a short story must have, like a scorpion's sting in its tail, a curlicue which sums up the story. (xii)

Khushwant Singh's stories derive their structure from the plot which is based on conflict or crisis in character and situation. The development of action displays a linear development in sequence and is marked by progression in time rather than in space. The stories are to some extent episodes which often seem to dominate other elements in the story like character and theme. A series of complications are unfolded in the action. This arouses curiosity and creates suspense. Ultimately the conflict is resolved; and the resolution brings out either a surprise or an unexpected tragicomic outcome or revelation.

It is interesting to note that while Khushwant Singh's novels deal with problems of wider and national perspective, his short stories deal with problems at the microlevel—at the individual level. While his novels reveal how the problem at the macrolevel affects the individual, his short stories implicitly convey how the problem at the microlevel could affect the society in a wider perspective. His short stories are not for open propaganda. His stories, in keeping with the concept of Jim Hunter, "do not intend to drug their readers,
or soothe them, in any way, but to delight and disturb" (8). In a subtle manner, his stories convey ideas which speak volumes for his commitment. Most often his short stories do not end with finality; rather they would have open endings which provide ample scope for the imagination of the readers.

With a rich sense of humour, Khushwant Singh satirises various aspects of life. Stories like "Karma" and "A Bride for the Sahib" make fun of the hypocrisy of aping the English manners. "Karma" is a tale about the plight of the Oxford-returned Sir Mohan Lal. He looked down upon anything Indian, his wife not excluded. Whereas he, as a successful barrister travelled first class, his illiterate wife travelled interclass. In the train he was looking for a pleasant conversation with British officials. But quite unexpectedly he was thrown out of the first Class compartment of the train unceremoniously by two English soldiers who were entitled to travel only in the second class. Ironically his wife was travelling in comfort in her interclass compartment. As Shahane rightly puts it,

Sir Mohan is a study in alienation; he deliberately dissociated himself from his native soil and cultural roots. However, except in his dress, he is not English at all. (Khushwant Singh 36)
The equality of man and woman which is the basic element of Western civilization is totally absent from Sir Mohan Lal's relationship with his wife. He pays the price for his artificially contrived hypocritical alienation from his native culture. The title "Karma" is significant, referring to the inevitable nemesis resulting from the ironical turn of the wheel of fate.

Similarly "A Bride for the Sahib" is a tragic tale of conflict between the East and the West. Mr. Sen is a Westernised oriental gentleman who is married to a typical Indian wife. He is an un-Indian Indian and he wishes to behave like a cultured and dignified English man. But his wife, Kalyani is very shy and unsophisticated. He drinks whiskey and soda while Kalyani eats betel leaves. On their first night, Sen spends all the time listening to Western music and drinking; Kalyani, utterly disappointed, goes to sleep. The next morning's silent breakfast confirms the quickly widening gulf between them. Matters reach a point of no return. So Kalyani ends her life by taking an overdose of pills.

If the hypocrisy of Mohan Lal results in his humiliation in the hands of two English soldiers, the hypocrisy of Sen results in the destruction of marital harmony and the suicide of the bride. Though Sir Mohan Lal
and Mr. Sen are individuals, they are also types representing a segment of upper class Indians who took pride in blindly imitating the English way of life and scorned everything Indian during the British Raj. The aping of Western culture which has no roots in the Indian soil, Khushwant Singh seems to say, cannot broaden human understanding and perspective; instead it has made people hypocrites and has dehumanized them.

"Mr. Singh and the Colour Bar" is perhaps another version of "Karma." The pompous, showy and morally hypocritical Mr. Singh is critical of the absence of European etiquette among the Indians in Britain. They belch loudly. They sit on their haunches in lavatory seats and make them dirty. Things like these cause unpleasantness and unpleasantness causes prejudice. Mr. Singh is also indignant at the Indians who are obsessed with sex. He declares: "Anyone who rapes anyone should be hanged. Hanged ten times" (The Collected Short Stories 175).

He assumes airs of infallibility and stresses the importance of moral and social uprightness in human life. But towards the end of the story his hypocrisy is exposed in a casual conversation in which a brunette in glittering tight-fitting trousers reveals how she enjoyed the company of one Mr. Singh at the hotel a few days earlier. Mr. Singh is
leading a double life, pretending to be "moral" but really being a flirt. This hypocrisy of Mr. Singh reminds one of Shakespeare's words:

O, what may man within him hide
Though angel on the outward side!

(Measure for Measure 3.2. 276-77)

"The Insurance Agent" is yet another story in which Khushwant Singh unmasks the social pest, Swami. Swami, the Insurance agent is an obtrusively hospitable character. In order to sell his insurance policies, in a highly artificial manner, he socializes and enlarges his circle of acquaintances. On one occasion, his over enthusiasm betrays him when he enquires two bachelors about the health of their wives and children. Then Mr. Swami appears at the funeral of the wife of the retired president of the city corporation. He weeps for sometime though he has never met either the president or his wife before. He tactfully introduces his business along with the philosophy of the transitory nature of life. And he gets the insurance papers singed by the retired president even at the cremation ground. To crown it all, he leaves the scene before the funeral is over in search of another customer.

Khushwant Singh's art of satirical portrayal is seen at its best in "Mr. Kanjoos and the Great Miracle". Kanjoos, as
the word suggests are misers to the core. They lead a wretched life in order that they may die rich. They frequent the club and drink whiskey at others' expense without ever reciprocating the hospitality. But they often say that the greatest miracle is that although man knows his end is certain he never entertains the thought of death.

When Kanjoos family is in Germany as members of the Indian delegation, they continue to practise the art of miserliness with extreme skill. The climax is reached when Mr. & Mrs. Kanjoos arrange the wedding of their eighteen year old daughter at 3 p.m. on August 15 on the embassy premises. The plan works so well and they receive numerous gifts and the wedding dinner is given at the government expense. But all along he repeatedly speaks of the transitory nature of life and the utter uselessness of wealth after death.

The repetition of this idea and the total rejection of the same in their life by the Kanjoos are highly ironic and reveal the sick mind of the characters as well. Fred Mayne's comment on this type of behaviour is worth considering:

The eccentricities of mind and character may reveal themselves in verbal repetition. In Arms and the Man, Sergius's 'I never apologise' is funny because he behaves 'like a repeating
Apart from these short stories which deal with individual’s eccentricities and follies, a few of Khushwant Singh's short stories reveal his sociological commitment on the part of the writer. The story "Man, How the Government of India Run!" presents a realistic picture of how the Government offices function in India. The story is based on three characters Sunder Singh, Sambamurthy and Ghosh. They are stenographers in the secretariat. They while away their time without doing a bit of work. One day, for being late, the boss mildly warns Sunder Singh. This makes the three stenographers angry. They go for tea, discuss world affairs and read the matrimonial advertisements. At the stroke of 5 O'clock the office closes and they make their way towards their homes in their cycles. They reach home with the satisfaction of having "helped" the Government in its successful functioning. Khuswant Singh picturises the style of functioning in government offices candidly:

... the secret of success in government service is simple. You only have to get on with the man just above you and forget every one else. It has nothing to do with work or ability or anything like that. (The Collected Short Stories 101-102)
Similarly "My Own My Native Land" is a satirical portrayal of the narrator's tedious and unpleasant experience at the customs office on his return from abroad. The prospect of a thorough examination at the customs is so galling that the narrator seeks the service of a middleman to wriggle out of the situation. A payment of ten rupees to the middleman works miracles and the narrator's packages are cleared without any inspection. And the narrator is angry over the delay caused deliberately to extract bribe from the people that the artist in him turns the anger into a sarcastic remark at the end of the story: "At a wayside restaurant I begged the driver to stop for a minute and join me for a drink. We raised our glasses to a 'Jai Hind'" (The Collected Short Stories 208).

In "Rats and Cats in the House of Culture" also Khushwant Singh directs his satire against officialdom, governmental procedure and methods of work. Director Langford makes every possible effort to clear the House of Culture of all rats and cats. But cats outwit the officials by triumphantly announcing their return at the plenary session of the International conference of the House of Culture. The story is farcical and creates a comic effect. Yet one cannot miss the punch in the story which ridicules the corrupt officialdom. Khushwant Singh believes that man's span of life is lent for lofty ideals, not for selfishness,
not to be wasted away in aimless dreams, but to improve ourselves and mankind. For him, work is worship, and he will not make any compromise on that. His consistency in this attitude is confirmed by his conditional support for imposing Emergency and "rescuing India from the brink of chaos to which Opposition leaders had dragged it" (Indira Gandhi Returns 97).

Khushwant Singh uses irony as a mode of statement which expresses a meaning contrary to the stated one. In some cases, there is abundant discrepancy between the expectation and the realisation, or between the appearance and reality. In some other cases, the total effect of the story is ironic. For instance in "The Mark of Vishnu" apart from the verbal irony, the author, being an agnostic, seems to question the superstitious belief of Gunga Ram in the wider context of religion and its ironic complexities in Indian life.

Gunga Ram, a pious Brahmin servant pours milk every night for the Kala Nag or black cobra and he worships it. He has faith in Vishnu and regularly smeared his forehead with a "V" mark in sandalwood paste to honour the deity. The scientifically oriented mischievous school children of the household ridicule him for this. On a rainy day the boys notice the cobra and break its back. Without damaging the
hood, they put it in a tin box. They take it to the classroom to show it to the teacher. As soon as the lid is taken off, the wounded cobra bursts out in anger. It drags itself to the door. Outside the classroom, Gunga Ram stands with a saucer of milk; and he goes down on his knees. With folded hands in prayer, he bows his head to the ground craving forgiveness. In desperate fury the cobra bites him all over his head and then escapes. Gunga Ram cries in agony and collapses immediately. He turns pale and blue and froth appears in his mouth. The teacher wipes the little drop of blood on Gunga Ram's forehead and sees underneath the "V mark where the Kala Nag has dug his fangs."

The title itself is ironic. The mark of Vishnu is a symbol of divine preservation whereas the "V" mark dug by the Kala Nag's fangs is fatally destructive. It is the very reversal of the original Hindu symbol. The greatness of the artist lies in presenting implicitly the conflict between superstition and reason, the pagan faith in animal deity and the sheer aggressive animal character, literacy and illiteracy. By carefully maintaining objectivity, with extraordinary craftsmanship Khushwant Singh has juxtaposed the values of Gunga Ram, the school boys and the teacher towards the cobra. Speaking of D.H.Lawrence's short stories Frank O'Connor remarked: "It [the story] doesn't deal with problems; it doesn't have solutions to offer; it just states the human
situation." This is true in the case of "The Mark of Vishnu" also.

In a similar way in "The Great Difference," he suggests the hypocrisy of institutionalized religion and the hollowness of its pompous practitioners. The religious spokesmen of Islam and Hinduism are attending a World Congress of Faiths in Paris. Their behaviour on the boat train reflects their mutual hostility -- the gulf between their preaching and practice. They express deep rooted prejudices towards each other. A young girl in Paris who knows no language other than French wishes to discuss her spiritual problem with the two religious leaders. But she does not turn up at the appointed hour. However, she has left a note of apology at the hotel which reads Je Comprends bien la difference (I understand the difference very well). How she has understood the difference is the puzzle of the story. Here the subtext is quite ironical, but subtle.

"The Mark of Vishnu" and "The Great Difference" have the younger generation represented by the school children and the young Paris girl. They are shrewd and they prefer science to superstition and practice to precept. And Khushwant Singh has intertwined suggestively a strong sociological motivation behind these seemingly simple
stories. What the two religious leaders in "The Great Difference" are not able to educate, the two dogs are able to do in "The Riot." The dogs through their basic unchanging love educate men about love. Thus the crown of creation, namely, man is inferior to a dog in matters of mutual love. Rani, a street dog is given shelter by Ram Jawaya, the Hindu shopkeeper. Rani, a pariah bitch becomes friendly with Moti, a cross between a Newfoundland and a Spaniel, owned by Ramzan, a Muslim green grocer. Then, the communal violence breaks out in the town between the Muslims and the Hindus. Night curfew is imposed; the streets are deserted. Ram Jawaya's shop is burnt down. The police open fire to contain the riot and many persons are killed. When peace is restored, Ram Jawaya comes to inspect the site of his old home. It is all in shambles; but in the corner there lies Rani with her litter and beside her, Moti is guarding his bastard brood.

Like Jonathan Swift, Khushwant Singh believes that man's inhumanity to man is more detestable because he is capable of reason; but he either misuses it or does not use it at all. Further man takes inordinate pride in himself — a pride hardly justified by his love for war, cruelty and bloodshed. In Gulliver's Travels Gulliver describes life in England to the Houyhnhnms (horses) who are appalled at the notion that such a cantankerous, evil race as men should think themselves lords of creation. In fact the horses are
gentle, civilized, and highly reasonable creatures. They marry according to genetic laws, and they accept death calmly. They cannot understand the concept of lying, for they consider words to be meant for communication, not for concealment. Gulliver agrees with the Honyhnhnms that man is vile, and finds himself living happily with the horses in a totally rational society. "The Riot" is also a bitter attack on human depravity.

In the case of George Bernard Shaw, the Great War -- which caused innocent men to kill one another -- destroyed his faith in Man. That is why he condemns both men and society in Heartbreak House for he has lost faith not only in his previous teachings but also in the educability of mankind. Khushwant Singh too, it seems, has lost faith in humanity after the bloody holocaust that followed the Partition. Perhaps, in "The Riot" he is making a desperate attempt to educate men about love through animal imagery.

But the natural physical love between man and woman manifests itself in different forms in Khushwant Singh's stories like "The Butterfly," "Kusum" and "A Love Affair in London." The central character in "The Butterfly" is Ramesh Chandra, also known as Charles. He is the butterfly, the symbol of inconstancy in relation to women and the world. Khushwant Singh here finds an opportunity to ridicule the
concept of divine love which exists only in the imaginary world of the idealists who pretend to ignore the real world. This, perhaps, is in agreement with the views of D.H.Lawrence: "You can cut your cloth to fit your coat, but you can't clip bits off your living body, to trim it down to your idea" ("Why the Novel Matters" 135).

"Kusum" has Freudian undertones; it is the story of the collapse of unnatural psychic fences created around the principal character in the face of the powerful natural force namely sexual urge. Although Kusum is only eighteen her manner is that of a middle-aged woman. Unlike her college friends, she has no use for modern fashions, nor does she have any interest in boys. She believes that a woman's place is in the kitchen. She seldom laughs and she never tries to look attractive. One day when she cycles home, she runs into a young hawker with a basket of oranges on his head. She falls on him and then rolls over on the road. Kusum is angry. But the hawker shuts one of his eyes in a long, lecherous wink and makes the sound of a loud kiss. And this, when she gets home is enough to open her eyes to the real and natural world. She starts taking efforts to look attractive. Khushwant Singh who shuns hypocrisy in all spheres of life does so in matters of sex as well. In his view sex is woven into the whole texture of
human body and Khushwant Singh considers sex to be as natural as breathing.

In another story "The Rape" Dilip Singh is in love with Banta Singh's attractive daughter, Bindo. One day he watches her washing herself and he is possessed of a maddening desire. He runs towards her and forcibly takes her to a pasture where she can resist him no more. After being raped, she looks at him with vacant expression and tears roll down her cheeks. Dilip is charged with rape before a court of law. He is sure to be convicted, yet he desperately pleads with the magistrate: "before you send me to jail, emperor, ask her if she was not willing. I went to her because she wanted me. I am innocent." (The Collected Short Stories 58).

The magistrate then asks her whether she went to the accused of her own free will. To the surprise and shock of all, she answers 'Yes'. The charge of rape is found to be baseless. As Khushwant Singh himself has put it in the interview,

... 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. (Appendix)
The utterance of a lie by the girl at the crucial stage to save her rapist is very puzzling and shocking. Perhaps, Khushwant Singh's New Woman might have understood the essence of Bacon's views:

That which is past, is gone, and Irrevocable;
And wise Men have Enough to doe, with things present, and to come.... (18)

Bindo's final confession in the court besides being an anti-climax, reveals the victim's challenging practical approach and her noble forgiving attitude. And there is reason to believe that this unexpected noble gesture on the part of the victim will have a stunning impact on the culprit and bring him around to lead a kind and happy life with her.

A careful reader may discover a psychological dimension as well, notwithstanding the sociological implication of the authorial comment. It is a question of love - hate relationship and the writer makes it very clear. Dilip Singh at one stroke hates Bindo's father. But in another stroke he has her in his fantasy:

Dilip Singh was wide awake and his heart beat wildly. The loathsome figure of Banta Singh vanished from his mind. He shut his eyes and tried to recreate Bindo as he saw her in the
star light. He desired her and in his dreams he possessed her. (The Collected Short Stories 54)

Bindo's attitude may equally be described as one of love-hate relationship:

Dilip was full of remorse. He had never intended hurting her. He caressed her forehead with his large rough hands and let his fingers run through her hair.... Bindo opened her large black eyes and stared at him blankly. There was no hate in them, nor any love. It was just a blank stare. (The Collected Short Stories 56)

To provide such complexity in a short story is really an artistic achievement on the part of the writer. The story also reveals the author's understanding of the unpredictable ways of human psyche.

Khushwant Singh's treatment of love takes a different dimension in "A Love Affair in London". The idyllic love here, through Khushwant Singh's art blossoms and makes a poetic communication about life. The Platonic love takes the place of physical love. The story presents Kamini Garve, a young girl on her first visit to London. She has never met
an English man before except for her encounter with the magistrate Robert Smith. At that time she was only seventeen and she was produced as a satyagrahi in his court for having participated in the Quit India Movement in 1942. She was so bold that when the magistrate advised her to go back to school and mind her studies, she retorted that he should go back to England and mind his country's business. The magistrate was taken aback and he awarded her one week's imprisonment and gave her a copy of the collected works of Hilaire Belloc -- to read in the jail.

When Kamini was released from jail, she came to know that Robert Smith had resigned his job and left for home. But Kamini had secretly harboured the hope that she might meet Robert Smith in England. It was a curious and complex feeling -- very difficult to categorise either as love or just fancy.

Now in London, she looks into the telephone directory and is dismayed by the large number of Robert Smiths in it. She constantly thinks of him but she could not see him. The revelation of Robert Smith's death from the most unexpected source is the tragic finale. Robert Smith was really attracted towards Kamini Garve. Perhaps, it was a case of love at first sight. Then it is difficult to understand why he resigned his job so soon. In Kamini's case, she could not
realise the significance of the encounter with Robert in India. So it seems that it could be a love affair in England.

The fact that many questions arise and they all remain unanswered at the end of the story is the proof of the artistic talent and artistic growth of Khushwant Singh. The story has a haunting quality and the experience is a sample of the mysterious complexities of life of which Virginia Woolf has to say this:

Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (qtd. in Introduction. xxii)

Ironic is one of the principal aspects in Khushwant Singh’s stories. Irony in the words of Brian Lee:

... is a mode of discourse for conveying meanings different from – and usually opposite to – the professed or ostensible ones.... All irony, however, depends for its success on the exploitation of the distance between words or events and their contexts. (A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms 128)
"The Voice of God" is an ironic presentation of typical Indian electioneering and the inevitable result. In India quite often, the election becomes a battle between God and Mammon. In the story Sardar Ganda Singh is declared elected with a huge margin. To his discredit, he has earlier helped the British government in suppressing the peasant agitations and he has been a well-known patron of thugs. His men rob with impunity and share the proceeds with the police.

But Baba Ram Singh the genuine representative of the people loses both the election and his deposit. Thus the genuine voice of the people is suppressed by muscle power and money. The poverty-striken, illiterate and gullible people fall easy prey to the unscrupulous politicians.

The people have elected the dishonest and rejected the honest; and the result is that the destiny of the people is at stake. Under these circumstances the survival of democracy in India in the long run becomes highly doubtful. On the subject of canvassing, Macaulay declared:

It is not necessary to my happiness that I should sit in Parliament; but it is necessary to my happiness that I should possess, in Parliament or out of Parliament, the consiousness of having done what is right.

(The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay 260)
Perhaps, the story is an implicit plea for a change of heart among the Indian politicians, and the electorate in order to ensure a healthy democracy.

Just as Khushwant Singh condemns and ridicules the hypocritical and dishonest attitudes of man towards his fellow human beings, he exposes the dual attitude of man towards animals. The muslim hunter, without any sense of love and kindness in "The Fawn" shoots the fawn and the doe one by one and kills them. Then he performs the ceremonial cutting of the animals uttering "Bismilah." At the end of the story the hunter sips his scotch and soda along with his friends; and he is pleased with himself:

I feel happy at the end of a day like this. Good exercise. Good sport. No backbiting, no bickering, no hatred, no unkindness. It is a clean life. One goes back to the world with more charity and understanding.... ("The Collected Short Stories 92-93)

The cruelty and the hypocrisy of man stand in sharp contrast to the doe's deep affection and intense sorrow over the killing of the fawn and its sacrifice. The ruthless killing in "The Fawn" is similar to the killing of Sarus crane in I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale. By juxtaposing man's cruelty and religiosity with the animal's love and innocence,
Khushwant Singh seems to question the very status of man being the crown of creation. While the story "The Fawn" exposes the animal in man, "The Portrait of the Lady" brings out Khushwant Singh's delicate sensitivity to the animal world. The narrator's grandmother in "The Portrait of a Lady" is pious and humane. Her love for animals is so much that she gives away wheat bread to village dogs. She spends a lot of time feeding sparrows. One day she takes ill and dies peacefully. She is taken on a crude stretcher for cremation; surprisingly all over the verandah thousands of sparrows sit scattered on the floor. These birds do not chirp, nor do they even touch the crumbs of bread thrown to them. The sparrows give her a moving silent farewell.

The hunter is happy over his killing of the fawn and he sips scotch; but the sparrows mourn the death of the lady without touching any food. Perhaps, the stories imply that birds are superior to humans in matters relating to finer sensitivity. Unlike humans, birds have no vocabulary. The birds cannot convey anything; Yet paradoxically they communicate a lot as they did to William Wordsworth in "To the Cuckoo":

Though babbling only to the vale
Of sunshine and of flowers,
Thou bringest unto me a tale
Of visionary hours. (The Golden Treasury 247)
"India is a strange country" is an absorbing story of Kenneth Tyson's intense attachment for his dog. This makes him postpone his leaving India for his country. The Indians suspect that he has a mistress. They attribute his unwillingness to leave India to this. But Tyson and his wife have nothing but contempt for Indian literature, sculpture, and music. Tyson, everyday takes his dog Martha for a walk through the beautiful park in Delhi. And years roll on. One day Martha runs across the street and is run over by a speeding car. Martha dies with her eyes fixed on her master and Tyson's eyes are filled with tears. After two weeks, Tyson is seen at Palam airport and he takes the flight to England. To a question why he has delayed so much his return to his country, he replies:

It's these damned uncivilized laws England has for animals. How can you leave a dog you love in quarantine for six months, I ask you?

(The Collected Short Stories 168)

His love for his dog is so much that in his view, the civilized law of English become "uncivilized" and India which he condemns for all other things becomes a "strange country".

From the treatment of ordinary day-to-day practical aspects of life, Khushwant Singh moves on to a realm which
is uncommon for a rationalist. His treatment of the intangible, inexplicable and supernatural elements of human experience brings out, perhaps, his view of the complexity of life and the danger of oversimplifying it. In "The Memsahib of Mandla", John Dyson dismisses the notion of the figure of woman in a white dressing gown as superstition and unreal fear. But when he sees the phantom human figure standing near his bed, he is stunned; and he gropes for his gun. He catches the butt and fires in fear and he falls under the impact of the full discharge of the gun in his face. The rational human being becomes the victim of the fear of ghost.

Once again the intangible and incomprehensible aspects of human experience find expression in "Death comes to Daulat Ram." Daulat Ram is in his last moments. His son Ranga and other children have already arrived. When Ranga is lunching with his brother, suddenly he sees his grand father's portrait hanging on the wall. He is stunned by the portrait's similarity with the beggar whom he has seen at the gate a little earlier. He has even talked to the beggar and has asked him to go to the kitchen to have food. Now Ranga turns pale. Even the portrait seems to be speaking to him. He rushes out of the home to see the beggar, but the old man has gone away. A little later Daulat Ram breathes his last.
The dead grand father visiting the house at the time of Daulat Ram's death in the form of an old man is something extraordinary. It is a Hindu belief that a man must breathe his last surrounded by his close relatives. The realist in Khushwant Singh knows that the event cannot stand the scientific scrutiny. The story transcends rational comprehension and carries mysterious, inexplicable and supernatural implications. Perhaps, the rational Khushwant Singh has come to terms with the irrational elements of human experience.

Quite interestingly and strangely, in the story "Posthumous" Khushwant Singh decides to die - just for the fun of it as it were. He does believe that his death would be very much mourned by his friends. Because he is very popular, he expects that Tribune would mention his death on its front page. With lots of hopes and expectations his ghost emerges from the corpse and sits at the entrance to wallow in posthumous glory.

But he is terribly disappointed. Tribune lets him down very badly. Even at the funeral only a small crowd of unexpected people is present. When the procession starts his close friends from all walks of life leave one by one under some pretext or other. Only about half a dozen people are walking behind the corpse. Even these people disappear into
the district courts and Khushwant Singh finds himself in solitude. He begins to feel very small. Finally he has only one human being, the driver of the cart. Even the driver has not realized, "the enormity of the soul whose decayed mansion he was transporting on its last voyage" (6).

Khushwant Singh is thoroughly fed up and there are three ways open to him. Either he can give himself up to scorching flames or he can go to a world of sensation where harlots and other people of ill repute live or he can go back to his earlier existence without the spirit of adventure and the lust for living.

By imagining himself to be dead, Khushwant Singh makes himself a butt of ridicule. Indeed to be able to laugh at one's own self is a rare quality among writers. In a country like ours, where there is paucity of humour, Khushwant Singh's comments are pertinent:

You have to have a capacity to laugh at yourself which is singularly missing. As a people we can tell cruel jokes about other people but not many of us are able to see the stupid side of our own selves. ("Why don't Indian's ever laugh?" ix)
While laughing at himself, Khushwant Singh ridicules the people for their machine-like life without the human content. In this context, one is reminded of the following lines by Robert Frost:

\[
\text{No, from the time when one is sick to death,}
\text{One is alone, and he dies more alone.}
\text{Friends make pretence of following to the grave,}
\text{But before one is in it, their minds are turned.}
\]

("Home Burial" 395)

An interesting feature of Khushwant Singh's short stories is his ability to ridicule the widely accepted values. By doing so, he ideologically alienates himself from the block thinking and stands aloof as an individual. On many aspects of sociological living in India namely, work, religion, politics and love, Khushwant Singh's views are not in conformity with the opinion of the majority. He shuns the sham and advocates honesty. As a committed writer he alienates himself from the ills of society and through art he suggests remedial steps to alleviate the suffering.

The success of his stories is brought about by the technique he adopts. The language is simple and straight-
forward. The stories have a ring of truth about them. As in the case of "The Rape," Khushwant Singh introduces anticlimax at the end of the story. This technique apart from giving a punch to the narration shocks the readers into thinking on lines which are not quite accepted and acceptable to society. In "The Voice of God," the voice of the people in electing the dishonest and unscrupulous can be anything other than the voice of God. With all his sense of humour, rich irony, Khushwant Singh satirizes the widely accepted values of society.

In another perspective, Khushwant Singh's short stories cogently deal with the question of colonial consciousness. As Vijay Mohan Sethi observes:

- First he studies the interaction between the typical Indian characters and the Anglicized upper class Indians who have imbibed the English ways of life and cannot communicate with each other in a desirable manner.
- Secondly, he analyses the behaviour of the Indians when they are in the midst of English men. The situation arising out of both types of encounters are almost invariably ironical, satirical and comic. (200)
For Khushwant Singh colonial consciousness becomes an area of absorbing interest which he employs in character portrayal to create humour and wit. The Anglicised Indian who apes the western life is a misfit not only at home but also abroad. Those who spend a few years in England become aliens or feel like aliens in their native land. They miss the cheerful London life, the academic years at Oxford, the freedom and excitement of the West. They become alienated in their native soil as Mohan Lal in "Karma" and suffer silently yearning for the Western mode of life.

The short-stories reveal Khushwant Singh's minute observation of men and matters as well as his ability for story-telling. Very insignificant things attract his attention and because of his sense of humour and exploitation of the technique of anti-climax, his stories become mild satires. The unique quality of his short stories is that he is able to present slices of life, holding a mirror upto Nature.

Though "to laugh at the follies and foibles of the society" is the purpose of the satirist as artist, a committed writer does not stop with fictionalising the problems of the society. Nor is he convinced that satire in the guise of fiction alone will serve the purpose. Hence, he goes to the more effective and direct medium of essays. In
the form of essay, a writer is free to say anything he wants to say directly to the reader and quite effectively too.

Hence Khushwant Singh has written a lot of non-fiction with a visionary zeal covering all aspects right from casual things to the need for a new religion in India and the bleeding Punjab. His effective use of language goes a long way to make his ideas deeply felt. Khushwant Singh's contribution to and through non-fiction is the nucleus of the next chapter.