

THEMATIC CONCERNS IN THE STORIES OF KHUSHWANT SINGH

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Abstract: “The buckets are contained in the ocean is no wonder. The wonder is when the ocean is contained in a bucket. The very meaning of ‘story’ is that the ocean should be contained in the bucket. A short story reveals such fundamental truth as cannot be explained in thousands of pages.” These lines appropriately fit in the short stories of Khushwant Singh. Khushwant Singh is at his best, in his role as a frank and forthright exponent of the contemporary Indian Scene. He handles a wide variety of themes. He ridicules whatever he considers repugnant in the most uninhibited language. He has written on every conceivable subject between heaven and earth. Khushwant Singh thus ranges over every aspect of life and over every variety of character, so his themes are of so immense variety that few can match him in the versatility of his genius. His stories produce the real picture of India and its culture, diversity, eccentricity, tradition, superstition and tolerance towards different religion which is unique and unparalleled.

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Introduction: As one takes up Khushwant Singh’s collection of short stories, the first thing that strikes the eye is the immense variety, his stories depict. He has written on every conceivable subject between heaven and earth. There are stories dealing with supernatural with suspense, with children, with animals, with human relationship of all shades and kinds, with the different professions, trades, vocations etc. With various social evils, customs, traditions, superstition etc. sometimes in a humorous, sometimes in an ironic satiric vein. There are stories of retribution and revenge of love and sex of ironic contrast and situations and pure humor or comedy or those in which humor mingles with pathos. There are stories of character which bring out Khushwant Singh deep insight into human psychology specially women psychology. There are stories which arouse our pity and curiosity for the downs and outs of society-a beggar, women of loose character and other socially rejected and discarded types. Khushwant Singh thus ranges over every aspect of life and over every variety of character, so his themes are of so immense variety that few can match him in the versatility of his genius.

Thematic Concerns: ‘The Voice of God’ is a story of the working of Indian Democracy the biggest democracy, in the world. It appeared in the second volume of Khushwant Singh’s short stories entitled ‘The Voice of God and other stories’ (1957). It is a story of the people of two villages in Punjab, Bhamba Khan and Bhamba Khurd, where nothing that is important ever happens. The life of both villages was very peaceful and calm. People worked hard and the result came in a bumper crop for the villagers. But the placid current of the course of life’s current in Bhamba was disturbed by electioneering and gusty political. By this story Khushwant Singh has made the reader to think about that how the money and demagogues play an important role in the so called democracy in India.

The story “Man How the Government of India Run!” is a clear picture of Indian bureaucracy. The theme is of how the official from the higher rank to the rank of Chhaprasi work in the offices of the Government of India. Sunder Singh, Sambha Murthy and Ghosh Babu are the true representative of the Indian office mentality. They are dam ‘busy’ and have no time for their personal lives for they are working in Government of India office. They are the most important people in the Government because they know the rules and regulations of the bureaucracy by heart. Their philosophy is “All work and no play makes jack a dull boy”¹. When Sunder Singh wife asks him about his well being he says that she doesn’t understand the importance of the people like him and takes him to be a simple husband. She doesn’t know how they have to work very hard in office throughout the day. After all “women, how you think the Government of India run if we did not work?”²

This story has a powerful theme and is the clear picture of the Indian culture and clearly shows that Indian Government offices have no work and a person does not do anything but gets his salary every month regularly, where the employees are very much aware of their ‘rights’, but do not care for their ‘duties’.

Khushwant Singh has a variety of themes in his stories and superstition is one of them. "The mark of Vishnu" has a powerful theme and extraordinary gripping narrative contents. The issue is presented between superstition and reason, popular belief and corporal reality, pagan faith in animal deity, and the sheer aggressive beastliness of the animal world, yet the problem remains whether the problem is appropriately presented. Ganagaram was a staunch Hindu who has a blind faith in religious things without having any scientific reason and his faith knows no arguments. Thus the story marks a conflict between faith and reason, religious belief and science. Being a writer of modern times Khushwant Singh wants people to have some logical sense against their superstition.

'The Memsahib of Mandla' is another story on the super natural theme. In the story This story shows that persons who are extra rational become quite ironically, the victims of their own rationalism because life is too complex for them to know its value. John become the involuntary victim of the supernatural. The events and the atmosphere in "The Memsahib of Mandla" are skillfully presented and rendered with remarkable power and intensity of emotion.

"My Own My Native Land" is again a depiction of Indian work culture but seen from a different angle. It catches our attention to one of the wide spread problem of the Indian Society and i.e. corruption. Through this story Khushwant Singh gives as account of the Indian system. Khushwant Singh is famous for telling the truth in a very clear manner and this story is a specimen of the same of quality of the writer.

Some of the themes of Khushwant Singh's short stories have sociological and psychological motivation was there is interplay of means and ends. This approach is particularly relevant to the stories which seem to have a predominantly sociological content and are motivated by a social or moral value.

"The Riot" is a perspective story on the theme which has sociological overtones. In this story Khushwant Singh here is trying to convey the message that whenever man becomes emotional and under a religious fervor, he loses contact with his intellect and Indians Hindu and Muslim become emotional in matters relating to their religion or sect and when once they become emotional they don't have a human being in their heart but they are only Hindu or Muslim in them and that is the main reason of riots in India.

In another story 'The Great Difference', which is also primarily based on the sociological theme there is a close connection between means and ends. Here Khushwant Singh presents the spokesmen of Islam and Hinduism as the true representative of their faiths to participate in the world congress of faiths in Paris. The behavior of the Muslim divine and the Hindu Pandit on the boat train is extra ordinary and reflex their mutual hostility. The writer employ's their hostile reactions, explicit and implied, as a means to create the irony emerging from the gulf between their preaching and practices. The story exposes the hypocrisy of institutionalized religion and the hollowness of its pompous practitioner. The exposition of Hindu and Muslim rituals is used as a means of achieving the ultimate effect of laying bare the reality of corrupt religious institution and their pretentious preachers.

"Mr. Kanjoos and the Great Miracle" is also a story of the 'types' in Indian society where the theme is how the people are kanjoos or miser and become figure of fun. Mr. Kanjoos had developed a talent for disappearing exactly at the signing of the bills and the author, of course had to sign for the Kanjooses..The Kanjoos are figures of fun and also object of Khushwant Singh's unrelenting ridicule and satire. They are satirical embodiments of social and individual limitations. The Kanjosses are real enough since their types exist in Indian Society, though they may be rare.

'The Portrait of A Lady' is another story in which the central character is effectively individualized. The theme of the story is the Indian women who are motherly, pious, affectionate, loving and kind hearted. The story is the picture of narrators grandmother, whose "face was a crisscross of wrinkles running from everywhere to everywhere"³. This story presents a contrast with Khushwant Singh stories on superstitions. The sparrow gave her moving, silent salute and farewell .The story is moving and the response of the sparrows seems even more effective and inwardly felt then what the reaction of human beings could have been. Khushwant Singh delicate sensitivity to the animal world is beautifully reflected in this exceptionally touching and moving story.

'Posthumous' is a curious blend of fantasy and bitter realism. Though the theme is death, the reaction of the friends, and the society after a man's departure from this Mundane world. It obviously the whole story takes

place in consciousness of the bedridden writers suffering from the high fever and nothing happens in reality. The rational mind of the writer prevails upon his wishful thinking and illusion about himself. He starts realizing the way of the world as they are. Men is loved and liked so long as he matters. People are eager to wait upon him but the moment as he ceases to matter, they tend to forget him. It is a lesson worth remembering for the people in public life.

Khushwant Singh was a widely travelled man. He has visited most of the countries of the world. He has a deep insight into the rustic life of the village to the urban life of Delhi or any other big city. Thus he got the chance to meet the people of different castes, creed, vocations, trends, habits and nature. So while writing stories he has many themes to his credit. His stories produce the real picture of India and its culture, diversity, eccentricity, tradition, superstition and tolerance towards different religion which is unique and unparalleled.

References:

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