

The Unvarnished Mirror: An Analysis of Social Realism and Social Critique in the Selected Novels of Khushwant Singh

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Abstract: Khushwant Singh stands as one of the most distinguished writers in contemporary Indian English fiction, recognized for his profound commitment to social realism and unflinching critique of Indian society. This paper analyzes how Singh employs an unvarnished style, characterized by wit, humor, and candor, to expose the complexities, contradictions, and hypocrisy prevalent in modern India. Focusing on selected novels—including *A Train to Pakistan* (1956), *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959), *Delhi: A Novel* (1990), and *The Company of Women* (1999)—the analysis explores his critique of historical trauma, political corruption, communal tensions, and shifting morality. Singh utilizes literature as a mirror to reflect the painful realities of life, such as the devastation of the Partition, the intricacies of the Sikh ethos, the failure of political leadership, and the candid exploration of human sexuality. Ultimately, Singh's work is characterized by its powerful blend of satire and deep humanistic concern, ensuring his legacy as a courageous chronicler of modern Indian life.

Keywords: *Social Realism, Social Critique, Train to Pakistan, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, Satire, Communalism, Sikh Ethos, Human Relationships.*

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Introduction

Khushwant Singh is a prominent figure in the field of Contemporary Indian-English Fiction, celebrated as an adept novelist, story writer, historian, and distinguished journalist whose literary achievements are far-ranging. His fictional works are deeply rooted in the Punjabi soil and Sikh religion, reflecting a genuine passion and concern for his community. Despite his claim as an agnostic, he attaches significance to Sikhism in his fictional world, which plays a major role in his fictional Cosmos. Singh's ability to vividly depict the intricacies of Indian society with honesty, humor, and satire has cemented his place as an iconic author.

The essence of Khushwant Singh's contribution lies in his use of social realism, which he uses to explore the realities of life, omitting nothing that is "ugly and painful". Social realism, defined as the depiction of social reality in its true colors, forms the cornerstone of his writing, allowing him to examine social, political, and economic factors impacting the lives of ordinary individuals. His work reflects a psychological tenor, navigating themes without the hindrance of a purely personal spirit.

Singh is especially renowned for his novels that explore pivotal moments in Indian history and society. *A Train to Pakistan* (1956) and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959) are lauded as realistic novels of Post-War-II English fiction, deeply influenced by the political disturbances of the era. *Train to Pakistan* is considered one of the finest realistic novels of its genre. The catalyst for his writing career was the horrific events of 1947, This is an open access article under the [CC BY-NC](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license

which shook him severely, leading him to write in order to express his indignation. He was a witness to the pre-partition national movement, post-partition, independence, and the complexities of the modern world.

Beyond historical narratives, Singh's fiction offers a candid portrayal of Indian society. His later works, like *Delhi: A Novel* (1990) and *The Company of Women* (1999), continue this tradition by fearlessly addressing sensitive and controversial subjects, including sexuality, political corruption, and hypocrisy. He openly discusses taboo subjects, societal norms, and cultural practices, challenging traditional beliefs and fostering necessary conversations. Through this unvarnished approach, Singh established himself not only as a great history fiction writer but also as a powerful political commentator and social critic. This analysis delves into the literary mechanisms Singh employs to uphold this tradition of social realism and piercing social critique across his selected novels.

The Unvarnished Mirror

The Tenets of Social Realism and Candid Style

Khushwant Singh's literary identity is fundamentally rooted in social realism, defined by the depiction of social reality in its "true colours". He is acknowledged as one of the major Indian English novelists of our times, using realism to present a humanistic vision of life. Unlike science which is universal, literature is personal, embodying the author's intense personality.

Singh effectively explores the realities of life, going beyond the surface reality grasped by other social writers, showcasing an expansive and truly comprehensive vision.

His writing style is characterized by its simplicity, directness, and engaging narrative, making complex ideas accessible to a diverse readership. This straightforward style is devoid of unnecessary ornamentation, allowing readers to focus on the core themes and messages. Crucially, Singh's realism is consistently fused with a distinct voice marked by wit, caustic narration, dark comedy, and satire. He purposefully employed this unique blend of humor and satire to comment on various social, political, and cultural aspects of Indian society, often achieving social commentary and critique that is both entertaining and thought-provoking. The objective of his editorial vision was straightforward yet bold: to "inform, amuse, and irritate" readers. He fearlessly addressed prevailing social issues in Indian society, such as "caste discrimination, gender inequality, religious tensions, and poverty".

Singh's works often attempt to expose the depths of the human psyche and the logic behind human behavior. His ability to capture the essence of human nature, flaws, and complexities makes his characters authentic and relatable, enhancing the overall impact of his storytelling. He holds a mirror to life, recording his observations of events and people. This unvarnished approach to realism, coupled with his fearless writing, paved the way for other writers to explore a broader range of subjects previously considered off-limits.

The Scourge of History: Critique of Communalism and Political Failure in Train to Pakistan and Delhi

Singh's most profound critiques often arise from his depiction of historical crises, particularly the Partition of India, which he personally witnessed. *Train to Pakistan* (1956) is his widely acclaimed novel on this subject, depicting the chaos and tragedy through the story of Mano Majra, a fictional border village. The novel is a "powerful portrayal of the human tragedy and communal tensions that accompanied the partition".

Through this narrative, Singh launches a scathing social critique against the political machinery responsible for the bloodshed. He depicts the "harsh reality behind the screen," showing that it is the "poor and common people who suffer because of the wrong decisions of politicians". In contrast, the "officers, politicians and leaders manage to slip away quietly," leaving the people helpless. For instance, Hukum Chand, the deputy commissioner, is distracted by getting drunk and "pawing the hired prostitute, Haseena," while tragedy unfolds. The novel skillfully records the "reign of violence and the complete destruction of human values".

Train to Pakistan contrasts the pre-Partition state of harmony in Mano Majra, a Sikh village situated near the Sutlej river, where "Muslims do not enjoy prosperity," serving as tenants to Sikh landowners. The village is a microcosm of society where different communities coexist peacefully until the violence begins. The influx of a train full of dead Sikhs transforms the village into a "battlefield of conflicting loyalties".

However, the novel asserts a humanistic antidote to this violence through the ultimate sacrifice of Juggat Singh, the village gangster, who ensures the safety of his Muslim lover, Nooran. Juggat Singh embodies the Sikh tradition of "valour, heroic action

and sacrifice," proving worthy of the Gurus' edicts against caste and creed. His final action implies the heroic motive that the "noblest end for a Sikh was to die for his state and the idea celebrated by Nanak that action is a means to salvation". Khushwant Singh's focus here is not only to highlight violence and hatred but to underscore the "ultimate humanism" found in love, which proves to be the "only resisting human power against all inhuman evil forces".

In *Delhi: A Novel* (1990), Singh extends his critique across centuries of history, blending history, romance, and sexuality. The novel vividly picturizes the modern trauma of the Hindu-Sikh riot in Delhi following Indira Gandhi's assassination. Singh addresses the deep-seated anti-Hindu feeling that has prevailed since the first Muslim invader arrived, emphasizing the arrogance of Islamic leaders. This is juxtaposed against the Sufi idealism and philosophy imparted by Saint Nizamuddin, which is offered as a way of humanism. The character Bhagmati, a hijra and a symbol of Delhi, displays a "non-communal attitude" and protects the Sikh narrator.

Critiquing Ethos and Morality in I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale (1959) applies social realism and critique to the political and familial dynamics within a middle-class Sikh household during the Quit India movement (1942–1943). The novel uses judicious characterization to reflect Sikhism with its "positive and negative traits".

The political hypocrisy of the era is embodied by Buta Singh, a senior magistrate who is anxious to remain in the good graces of the British government. Yet, he is forced by circumstances to "play a double game," encouraging his son toward the Britishers. His son, Sher Singh, represents the flaws in the political youth. Sher Singh, involved in terrorist activities, is depicted as a failure both as an educated youth and a freedom-fighter, willing to expose his friends when caught.

The novel sharply contrasts this failure with the spiritual and moral fortitude found in Sabhrai, Buta Singh's wife. Sabhrai alone strives to maintain the Sikh religion within the household. She embodies the Sikh ideal: "an abiding faith in the efficacy of prayer, love for all and malice towards none". When Sher Singh is tempted to betray his comrades, Sabhrai imposes a profound moral critique, advising him that naming his companions "would be doing a greater wrong," and he would "no longer be regarded as a Sikh". Sabhrai's characterization is a "fictional realization of the glorious Sikh ideals". She is guided by the mystic principle of "detachment in attachment preached by the Sikh Gurus". At the time of her death, she requests, "Let me go to my Guru with your blessings".

Singh does not shy away from the negative image of Sikhism, either. Sher Singh, the flawed protagonist, adopts violence as a political policy, declaring: "We are Sikhs who do not fear any enemies. We shall destroy all those who stand in our way". This militancy, presented as a "means of defence against religious persecution," came into being as a reaction against Muslim dominance and successive martyrdoms. Furthermore, Singh observes that sexual and sensual urges pervade all strata of society, highlighting the illicit relationships between upper-class characters like Madan and Champak, and the clandestine affair involving Shunno and Peer Sahib. By mingling the "spiritual and

the sensual," Singh clarifies the "down-to-earth aspects of Sikhism".

Satire on Social Hypocrisy, Class, and Sexuality

Khushwant Singh's use of wit, humor, and satire is essential in his critique of social hypocrisy, particularly regarding class, bureaucracy, and sexual morality. He pointed aggressively at "diverse social, political, administrative, and religious conflicts" through sardonic depictions of common people. He exposes "society's foolishness, idiocy, and unorthodox habits, as well as bureaucratic blunders".

Critique of Anglicized Snobbery (Karma)

In the short story Karma, Singh critiques the post-colonial phenomenon of Anglicized snobbery through Mohan Lal, an anglophile proud of his perfect English accent and Oxford background. He demonstrates his false superiority to Indian culture by traveling in a first-class compartment while his wife, a "genuine Indian Woman," travels separately in the ladies compartment. The comedic and critical climax arrives when two English soldiers enter his compartment, throw out his luggage, and beat him when he protests, throwing him out onto the platform. Singh uses this incident to satirize the delusion and eventual humiliation suffered by those who despise their own heritage for colonial snobbery.

Mocking Bureaucracy (Man, How the Government of India Run!)

Singh consistently satirizes administrative inefficiency. In Man, How the Government of India Run!, he attacks the government clerk, Sundar Singh, ironically stating that officials prioritize winning the "favour of the boss". Sundar Singh feigns exhaustion from hard work, ironically asking, "How the Government of India would run" without him. This darkly humorous observation highlights the stagnation and deceit prevalent in the system.

The Candid Exploration of Lust and Love (The Company of Women)

The Company of Women (1999) is Singh's boldest fictional foray into sexuality and contemporary middle-class morality. The novel critiques the transactional nature of arranged marriages in India, which are "often akin to business bargains," highlighting the desire for scandalous gossip among the urban elite. The protagonist, Mohan Kumar, divorces his wife and embarks on a journey of sexual gratification, convinced that "lust is the foundation of love". He actively avoids emotional involvement, interested only in lust, like his American counterparts. Singh exposes the "hypocritical attitude" of Indian society where "matrimonial columns look for caste, fair skin, money and whether the bride is a virgin," despite the public discussion of "true love". Singh's exploration of sexuality serves to showcase his characters' true nature and critique the underlying social desires.

The Grotesque and Awakening of Desire (Kusum)

In his short stories, Singh used grotesque characters and settings to critique society. Kusum explores suppressed psychological urges and the awakening of sexuality. Kusum Kumari, initially uninterested in cosmetics and modern fashions, is described with "grotesque sarcasm" due to her dull, overweight, and antique appearance. She shuns sex and is ignored by men. Her transformation begins after she collides with an orange hawk, who subjects her to "lustful and lewd remarks". He tells her, "No,

Miss Sahib, I am not blind, but I am one-eyed. He shut one of his eyes in a long, lecherous wink and made the sound of a loud kiss". Ironically, this vulgar gesture unintentionally allows Kusum to look in the mirror and realize she is beautiful, giving her an "enormous push" and leading her to apply lipstick and rouge. This scenario projects the hidden subjects in the human psyche, such as adultery, lust, and sexuality, triggered by the hawk, demonstrating how a flawed and grotesque character can inadvertently instigate positive self-perception.

The Unvarnished Critique of Organized Religion (The Great Difference)

Khushwant Singh, while a scholar of Sikhism and translator of Sikh texts, identified as an agnostic and maintained a deep skepticism toward organized religion. He declared: "One can be a saintly person without believing in God". His famous quote captures his view on material reality versus piety: "Morality is a matter of money. Poor people cannot afford to have morals. So they have religion".

In The Great Difference, Singh explicitly criticizes and mocks two major Indian religions, Hinduism and Islam, and their "blind followers". The main characters, Haji Hafiz Maulana and Swami Vasheshvra Nanda, are caricatures and symbols of hypocrisy. They are traveling to a World Congress for Faith in Paris but are consumed by mutual hostility and criticism, reflecting the "hidden ugliness, hostility, barbaric intuitions, partiality, and mercilessness of fellow humans in Indian society on a communal basis".

The Swamiji warns the Sikh narrator against eating with Muslims: "They are outcasts and dirty people. Didn't you see the very jug he carried into the latrine he uses for drinking water? It is most unbecoming of you, a Sikh, whose ancestors fought the Moslems, to eat with him!". The Maulana retaliates, criticizing the Swamiji's lack of hygiene and mildly attacking Sikhism. These characters are more interested in blaming each other's living habits and cleansing the "filth in their minds".

The absurdity of the congress itself is highlighted, as the delegates, fixated on religious differences, are distracted by Mlle. Jeanne Dupont in Paris, described grotesquely as a "creature of the flesh" whose "steatopygous behind was an invitation to lustfulness". Singh successfully demonstrates the "hidden acts of vengeance, blind faith, bias, and insecurities between Hindus and Muslims in Indian society," mocking self-proclaimed religious intellectuals.

The paper concludes that Khushwant Singh used his social realism and satirical flair to constantly expose the sinister side of religion, noting how it was historically exploited by successive rulers and politicians to "foster divisive tendencies" and secure power for themselves, urging people not to be used as "hapless pawns".

Conclusion

Khushwant Singh utilized the tenets of social realism to serve as the "unvarnished mirror" reflecting the true, often unpleasant, face of Indian society. His commitment was characterized by a fearless approach to contentious subjects, breaking literary taboos related to sexuality, politics, and communal strife. Through novels like Train to Pakistan and I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, he offered profound critiques of historical tragedies and political failures, contrasting the corruption

of leaders with the moral strength and humanistic sacrifices of ordinary people, such as Juggat Singh and Sabhrai. His unique writing style, blending humor, wit, and sharp satire, was an intentional tool for social critique, effectively mocking bureaucracy, Anglicized snobbery, and religious hypocrisy, as exemplified in *The Company of Women* and *The Great Difference*. Singh's ability to capture the complexities and contradictions of the Indian experience with such honesty and clarity ensures that his literary contributions resonate deeply. His legacy is that of a literary titan who championed secularism, tolerance, and open discourse, compelling readers to confront uncomfortable truths without compromise.

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