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Khushwant Singh's Craft of Column Writing

Subhash K. Shinde
Assistant Professor &
Head of the Department of English,
KKM College, Manwath- 431 505.
District: Parbhani,
Maharashtra, INDIA.

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Abstract:

Journalism becomes the fourth important pillar of the modern democracy after the three (the Legislation, the Executive and the Judiciary) enumerated in the Constitution of India. The columnists who write short articles on a variety of subjects are all the pillars of journalism. A column is a short article or a blog in a daily newspaper, weekly or a periodical. However, a column is composed from personal point of view following the ethics of journalism. It is believed that the columnist's words would be so authoritative as well as communicative that the reader can feel that the writer is speaking to him. Khushwant Singh was such a legendary columnist of international repute who has impressed the world with his authoritative voice. His columns cover political observations, Sikh religious texts, Urdu poetry and so on. His column *With Malice Towards One and All* expressed regularly secular exhortations and message of peace, brotherhood and tolerance. All of his columns would give impressions that he is a realist touching closely to all the sides of human life. He is considered as the finest political interpreter as well as the social critic. He was a versatile personality, a historical figure of modern India and was aptly called the 'Priest of Journalism'.

Keywords: Column, Craft, Journalism, Khushwant Singh, Legendary Columnist, Human Life, Secular, Realist, Versatile, Authoritative Voice, Priest of Journalism.

Education and knowledge are the two special eyes of the human beings which distinguish them from the rest of the animal kingdom. Infact, both of these are the two sides of the same coin. Knowledge can be obtained by taking a formal education in a school or a college. It stops when we get formal degrees. However, the process of informal education is comparatively long and it goes on up to the last breath of the human beings. We can learn

from the books by the eminent writers, through the columns written by notable journalists, through the sermons given by the brilliant bishops and even through the public speeches delivered by our beloved leaders. Thus, the journalism becomes automatically the fourth important pillar of the modern democracy after the three (the Legislation, the Executive and the Judiciary) enumerated in the Constitution of India. Journalists are the broad public teachers who teach crores of people in a school without walls. Press reporters, cartoonist, editors who write editorials, the specialized writers on medicine, law, business, education and the columnists who write short articles on a variety of subjects are all the pillars of journalism.

A column is a short article or a blog in a daily newspaper, weekly or a periodical. In the same way, a columnist is someone who writes for publication in a series, creating an article that usually offers commentary and opinions. Such columns may appear in newspapers, magazines and other publications, including blogs. Generally, readers would like to read short extracts written by well-known writers. Sometimes, it is observed that a column (a short extract) may be written by a team or a writer, may be with a penname. Many columnists contribute their columns in dailies or weeklies and, later on, publish them in a separate book form. However, a column is composed from personal point of view following the ethics of journalism. A column can be written on any subject from heaven to earth. Its purpose is to convey the columnist's thoughts to his readers. It is believed that the columnist's words would be so authoritative as well as communicative that the reader can feel that the writer is speaking to him. Khushwant Singh was such a legendary columnist of international repute who has impressed the world with his authoritative voice.

Khushwant Singh (1915 – 2014) was the distinguished columnist of India with a worldwide readership. Singh's weekly column *With Malice towards One and All* was accepted by several Indian notable newspapers. His columns were read widely in the country as well as abroad. Singh has edited *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and it has become India's widely read newsweekly having its circulation in lakhs. Moreover, he has edited two major Indian newspapers, *The National Herald* and the *Hindustan Times*. He always inspires young aspiring journalists by saying :

“I must dispose of the question which people often ask me:

‘What do you think of yourself as a writer?’ Without appearing

to wear the false cloak of humility, let me say quite honestly that I do not rate myself very highly.” (Singh 1993: 03)

Basically, Khushwant Singh was a versatile columnist. His columns covet political observations, Sikh religious texts, Urdu poetry and so on. His column *With Malice towards One and All* confined regularly to secular messages of peace. As an honest columnist, he admitted his errors openly. He discloses his technique of translation in his article *Urdu Poetry and Peerless Art of Translation* :

“In my humble opinion, the best translations of Urdu poetry into English were done by Victor Kiernan of the works of Faiz Ahmed Faiz. It was a joint effort. Kiernan was teaching English at Lahore's Chiefs College. Faiz was teaching English in an Indian college. Kiernan had an Indian wife and was fluent in Hindustani. They became friends and together worked on the translations. They are a joy to read.

In my not-so-humble opinion my translations came next in merit.... My translations have been well received. My rendering of Iqbal's *Shikwa* and *Jawab-i-Shikwa* published by the Oxford University Press has gone into more than 14 editions.” (<http://www.hindustantimes.com>)

Actually, he was interested in journalism when he crossed his fifties. He was the chief editor of the Times Group's *The Illustrated Weekly of India* from 1969 to 1978. He was the third editor of this colonial society magazine. However, he outlines his views in the foreword termed as *Khushwant Singh's Editor's Page* (1981) to a collection of column writing:

“Under its first two Indian editors [*The Illustrated Weekly*] became a vehicle of Indian culture devoting most of its pages to art, sculpture, classical dance and pretty pictures of flowers, birds, and dencing belles. It did not touch controversial subjects, was strictly apolitical and asexual (save occasional blurred reproductions of Khajuraho or Konarak). It earned a well-deserved reputation for dull respectability. I changed all

that. What was a four-wheeled victoria taking well-draped ladies out to eat the Indian air I made a noisy rumbustious, jet-propelled vehicle of information, controversy and amusement. I tore up the unwritten norms of gentility, both visual and linguistic. . . . And slowly the circulation built up, till the *Illustrated* did become a weekly habit of the English-reading pseudo-elite of the country. It became the most widely read journal in Asia (barring Japan) because it reflected all the contending points of view on every conceivable subject: politics, economics, religion, and the arts.”
(<http://www.lehigh.edu>)

Moreover, he had differentiated clearly between literature and journalism. In 1969, he joined *The Illustrated Weekly* at Bombay. Over there, his son Rahul was working already in *The Times of India*. Consequently, Rahul Singh resigned his profession because his father was working at the same place. Here, Khushwant Singh was very conscious about his work. Maharani Gayatri Devi of Jaipur states, “He is a man we all know and love. I admire his guts and his writing.”(Mehta 2007: 70)

During the period, *The Illustrated Weekly of India* was at the bottom as compared to all other *Times of India* group of publications. However, Singh developed *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and it had attained a respectable reputation. He was appreciated as well as detested by many of his contemporaries. Meanwhile, Mario Miranda designed the bulb logo for Khushwant Singh's column. Here, R. K. Laxman would publish frequently the photographs of inadequately dressed young females. This resulted that *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, a family magazine, was being turned into a worthless protest. So, Khushwant Singh compelled to lose his job. During his nine years with *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, Singh increased the circulation of it from 80,000 copies to over four lakhs. His farewell address was published in numerous newspapers. It is also published in his book *Not a Nice Man to Know: The Best of Khushwant Singh* (1993) under the title *Farewell to the Illustrated Weekly*.

After this, he had become the editor for Indira Gandhi's *The National Herald*. Here, he had to start from the scratches. The staff was on strike due to nonpayment for months. The police raided always the office to try to associate the manager of *The National Herald* in

certain unlawful commercial contracts. As a consequence, Khushwant Singh resigned the job after three months. He, then, became the editor of *New Delhi*, a fortnightly magazine which was launched by the Ananda Bazaar Group of Publication. It was also not suitable for him. His bad patch overcame when Indira Gandhi came to power. She recalled him for his support in her bad years. She offered him two choices either to become the High Commissioner in London or a Member of Parliament for Rajya Sabha alongwith the editorship of the *Hindustan Times*. He selected the second option. Thus, in 1980, he was nominated as a Member of Parliament and had also become the editor of the largest circulating newspaper of Delhi, the *Hindustan Times*. It was the crucial phase in the history of modern India. Trouble erupted in Punjab. Khushwant Singh, being a nominated member, did not anticipate expressing himself contrary to the Government on controversial subjects. Nevertheless, he expressed his disgust against the army invasion on the Golden Temple and, as a result, he returned his Padma Bhushan in protest. He expresses clearly his views on the event on 15 April, 1989 through the *Hindustan Times* :

“This year is the 400th anniversary of the foundation of the Golden Temple. Whether or not the event will be celebrated in Amritsar in the manner it should be is doubtful. With the wranglings going on in the administrative body, the SGPC, and the atmosphere of fear that still pervades after ‘Blue Star’ and ‘Black Thunder’, it is most unlikely that there will be anything spectacular. It is more than likely that Akali leaders who do not believe in doing anything constructive but are forever fabricating grievances, will again accuse the administration of despoiling the temple and cancel all celebrations to mark their protest.

The Temple has had a turbulent history. Ever since its foundation stone was laid by the Muslim divine the Hazrat Mian Meer, Mahants have mulcted it of money; it has been desecrated by invaders like Ahmed Shah Abdali and misused by goons like Massa Ranghar. Even after it was rebuilt in marble and gold leaf by Maharajah Ranjit Singh, hereditary priests exploited it as their family property. It was in the Golden Temple that General Dyer, the perpetrator of the

Jallianwala Bagh massacre was presented a robe of honour (siropa) by the Sarbarah (manager) Sir Aroor Singh. Its desecration by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who converted parts of it into a fortress, and the blasting of the Akal Takht by the Indian Army on the death anniversary of its founder Guru Arjun, was yet another tragic episode in its history.” (Singh 2001: 75, 76)

Thus, his three years' agreement with the *Hindustan Times* was not renewed because of his ostensible infidelity in the Parliament. However, K. K. Birla, the proprietor of the *Hindustan Times*, requested Singh to continue contributing his weekly column *With Malice Towards One and All*. This column had a faithful readership in those days. Khushwant Singh knew that he would not be nominated for the second time in the Parliament. During this period, he had written many of his essays, articles and sketches. He penned the sketch of Prabha Dutta who was his subordinate in the *Hindustan Times*. Moreover, he wrote articles like *Khalistan, My Years in Parliament, Giani Zail Singh* and *M Hidayatullah* in his famous book *Sex, Scotch and Scholarship* (2012).

Khushwant Singh read extensively a lot about Indian. He studied major religions of the world like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. As a result, he didn't hurt the sentiments of any religion throughout his writing career. Moreover, he worships Sikhism because he feels that it is the most accommodative religion in the universe. He states firmly his own thoughts about God and religion in his article *To believe or not? God knows* :

“Belief in god and religion is a kind of passion which generates both noble works and evil deeds. It has produced great literature, music, art, architecture and sculpture. It has also produced intolerance, civil strife, wars, cruelty and persecution. On the one hand it provides a crutch for those who are stricken with sadness, disease and adversity — solace denied to atheists and agnostics; on the other it creates delusions of hope and betterment for which there is no basis. Men of faith believe in miracles, which those without faith do not accept. However, you can have a good time and enjoy life whether or not you believe in god. I enjoy the good things of

life — tasty food, single malt Scotch, vintage wines and the company of the fairest of the fair.”
(<http://www.hindustantimes.com>)

Besides, Khushwant Singh also pointed out that Sikhism discards all sorts of divisions based on caste, creed and gender. He believes in equality amongst all the people. Hence, Sikhism trusts in multiculturalism. Thus, he is the best known for his sharp secularism. His column *With Malice Towards One and All* expressed regularly secular exhortations and message of peace, brotherhood and tolerance. Dr. A. P. J. Abdul Kalam commented rightly about Khushwant Singh :

“I always felt an urge to meet Sardar Khushwant Singhji. I felt this because I see in him a unique writer, who even at age 92 is continuously writing. Every week I see his articles. When I read them, I see happiness, I am reminded of an intellect who is beyond religions, cultures and language barriers. I feel that the writings are in continuity. And when I read his books, they give me the inspiring message of promoting love without bitterness. Such a personality really attracted me and I meet him briefly. The time I spent with him was so beautiful; it was an intellectual exercise for me. Above all, my respect for the writer increased. He told me that his mission in life is writing and through writing he gives happiness to people. I dream of writing about events and give a historical background in the way he does in his books. In short, Khushwantji gives happiness and courage to writers. His books that I have read *History of the Sikhs* and *Train to Pakistan* and many others, are great works. I wish him many more years of active life, health and many more columns.” (Mehta 2007: 68)

Thus, all of his writings would give impressions that he is a realist. He always presented the reality in his articles. He does not leave the readers with a feeling of awe and inspiration or even romance. He gives the readers a picture of the truth and does not believe in painting a rosy picture of something. The famous legendry actor, Amitabh Bachchan, commented about Khushwant Singh :

“Khushwant Singh has been a prolific columnist, a free and frank opinion-maker, fearless in his thoughts and deeds and an extremely endearing personality. I have known him both through his writing as well as through his personal relationship with my parents. He was well-known to my parents, especially my mother, she being a Sikh too. It was an honour for me when his son invited me to the launch of his biography in Delhi. Both of us were also briefly on the board of directors of *Tehelka*, and it was wonderful to spend quality time with him on matters concerning the media.” (Mehta 2007: 70)

Basically speaking, Khushwant Singh was the honest writer to the core. This made him a legendary personality in Indian journalism. He is considered as the finest political interpreter as well as the social critic. He is very truthful about himself :

“My concern is not with my outward appearance. My untidy turban beard or my glared look (I have been told that my eyes are those of a lustful budmash) but what lies behind the physical the real me compounded of conflicting emotions like love and hate general irritability and occasional equipoise, angry denunciation and tolerance of another's point of view, rigid adherence to self-prescribed regimen and accommodation of others convenience.” (Dhawan 1985: 36)

As already stated, Khushwant Singh was a versatile personality and a historical figure of modern India; his views are found upon many spheres of life. Khushwant Singh had become one of the leading scholarly figures of modern-day literary as well as journalistic sphere of the world. He has attained his zenith by his consistent hard work, strong willpower and perseverance. He had changed several jobs, travelled a lot, gathered lots of experience through them and consistently produced his columns, articles, short stories, treatises, novels and books on a variety of topics touching closely to all the sides of human life. Thus, he was aptly called the ‘Priest of Journalism’.

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