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## Religion as a Significant Constituent in Khuswant Singh's Writings

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### Abstract:

Khushwant Singh's condescending view of religion and religious sentiments were the epicentre of his writings. The current article is an attempt to highlight the fact that such religious sentiments and religious hypocrisy influenced the society to a larger extent. The author through his short stories, novels and various other literary writings has tried to break the shackles of religion which had restricted the society's thought process. Khushwant Singh has based his writings about religion after a thorough and intense study of the various religious scriptures, only to render authenticity to his literary articles. The author's stories and novels like *Train to Pakistan* revolve on the theme of religion as an effective tool for creating unrest and differences among the people. Undeterred by the critics, the author preaches for a new religion to be formed, one which values mankind and humanity and does not give credence to religious sentiments that encase the society within their shackle.

**Keywords: Religious sentiments, communalism, hypocrisy, humanity, peace.**

"Mortality is a matter of money. Poor people cannot afford to have money, so they have religion." This quote by Khushwant Singh gives one an idea of Khushwant Singh's condescending view of religion. Khushwant Singh, the insightful writer that he is, has a deep understanding of the social problems faced by Indians. His forceful, brilliant and passionate writings torment the Indian spirit in contemporary times, constantly prodding the society towards positive introspection and betterment. A deep analysis of his writings proves that the social historian in him has taken interest in these intimate, soul-searching studies of life, because in them we find truth, reflected with deep sensitivity and emotions. In a well-known published collection of essays, *Khushwant Singh's India*, the special qualities of Singh are described thus,

Khushwant Singh has been described as India's Malcolm Muggeridge. He holds nothing sacred. He enjoys nothing more than dipping his barbed pen in a pot of vitriol and lambasting the establishment, the accepted order of things political, religious and social – and puncturing inflated reputations." (*India, I*).

Khushwant Singh was a candid author who, without any apprehension of irking the society's sentiments, exposed the hypocrisy of some religious practices in many of his novels, short stories and writings. His well-acclaimed novel *Train To Pakistan* begins with villagers blaming their sins as the reason due to which they have to survive on a parched land. Khushwant Singh states,

Precipitated by reports of the proposed division of the country into a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan---- the resultant reactions of the citizens resulted in the death toll mounting to several thousands. Muslims said that Hindus had planned and started the killing. According to the Hindus, the Muslims were to be blamed. (9)

The villagers believe that their sins have evoked the ire of God. Prior to the partition there was peaceful co-existence of Hindus, Muslims and Christians in many parts of India. This, again, is vividly portrayed in many of the author's writings. In the novel "Train to

Pakistan”, the author has exhibited the peaceful co-existence of religion when Meet Singh the caretaker tells Iqbal Singh, “Everyone is welcome to his religion. Here, next door is a Muslim mosque. When I pray to my Guru, Uncle Imam Baksh calls to Allah.”(49)

Khushwant Singh has woven his characters using the threads of their respective religions. Religious sentiments are inherent in the decision making process of the society. The writer, through his characters tries to bridge the religious gap and create oneness in the minds of people. In another example from *Train To Pakistan*, we observe the character Iqbal Singh explaining to Meet Singh,

All the world respects a religious man. Look at Gandhi! I hear he reads the Koran Sharif and the Unjeel along with his Vedas, and Shastras. People sing his praise in the four corners of the earth. I have seen a picture in a newspaper of Gandhi’s prayer meetings. It showed a lot of white men and women sitting cross-legged. One white girl had her eyes shut. You see, Meet Singh, even the English respect a man of religion.(63)

Thus the author portrays the significance of religious sentiments which had great influence on the society’s thought process and ethos. Communalism has played a key role in shaping the religious history of modern India. As an adverse effect of the British Raj’s divide and rule policy, British India was partitioned along religious lines into two states – the Muslim majority Dominion of Pakistan and the Hindu majority Union of India. The 1947 Partition of India instigated rioting among the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. This bloody massacre has been vividly portrayed by no other author as has been done by Khushwant Singh through his writings. The author has intrinsically woven each of the characters in his novels and short stories in a manner that compels the readers to re-live the indelible trauma and torture of the partition, which keeps haunting the readers forever.

The author highlights the hypocrisy of religion in his book *India – An Introduction*. He states,

Religion plays a very important role in Indian life. But the claim that Indians are spiritually minded than other people in the world is arrant nonsense. There is more talk about money and material things in India than in the so called materialistic societies. Religious considerations are, for instance, sometimes more vital than the economic factors. Take the recurrent spectacle of famine. A Hindu believing in ahimsa – non- violence – and the sanctity of life, even if he was on the verge of death, would rather die than slaughter an animal to feed himself. (5)

Many of his writings revolve around religious sentiments, which are portrayed by the various characters. He reflects through his writings the dire consequences that people face, due to their belief in superstitions and religious sentiments. The intention of forming his characters around their religion seems to be for the sole purpose of educating the masses to shed these inhibitions and surge forward in life for betterment. His writings reflect his in-depth knowledge of the nuances of various religions, though he has little belief in these religious rituals. His story *The Mark of Vishnu* is another masterpiece which has been widely read and appreciated, leaving a lasting impression in the minds of the readers. Ram, the protagonist in this story, is a person who has blind faith in religion and hence he holds a strong belief that feeding the cobra (Kala Nag) with milk will ensure that he will never be harmed by this species. The writer, known for his sarcasm, gives an ironic twist to the story as Gunga Ram meets his untimely death when the cobra with all his fury bites Gunga Ram all over the head, where the sandalwood paste, a mark representing a devotee of Vishnu, is

present. Thus, the author tries to tactfully educate the masses of the consequences of blind faith in religious sentiments.

Khushwant Singh never allows his actions to be influenced by the behaviour or feelings of people around him. He acts in an un-hypocritical, candid manner even though he is well aware of the fact that it might hurt the sentiments of the people around. In his short story *The Great Difference*, part of *The Collected Short Stories Of Khushwant Singh*, he, without any inhibition, shares the food offered by the Maulana Sahib knowing very well that the Swamiji seated with them in the compartment will be offended. The writer conveys that it doesn't bother his conscience to share a Muslim's food. The writer is unable to restrict his opinion of his own religion and thus many a times invokes the ire of his own community. He provokes the anger of religious leaders when he laments the idea of giving undue importance to the Holy Scriptures and he wonders why they consider them revered, either as words of God or divinely inspired utterances. He highlights the hypocrisy of people who read them, recite or chant them without understanding them. It saddens the writer to observe that many of these scriptures are laced with high literary content and quality, which are unfortunately ignored. The crux of these writings is dishearteningly side-lined and the moral codes of do's and don'ts essential to maintain a civilized society are completely ignored. The anecdote shared by the writer about the revered ritual of reading the Granth Sahib is a true testimony of his feelings about the Holy Scriptures.

The writer denounces the practice of the religious traditions and rituals of his community, even though it provokes the ire of his community. He questions a custom, when he expresses that the reading of the Holy Scripture continuously for two days and nights (Akhand Path) by relay of readers even when others are asleep in the other room - which is a belief that it brings good fortune- is rather unexplainable. Many of his writings revolve around religious sentiments, which are portrayed by various characters. Khushwant Singh, though not a preacher of religious sentiments, is a true critic who advocates the essence of religion through his book *Sex, Scotch & Scholarship*. He begins the chapter on 'Religion' quoting a Punjabi Sufi poet's couplet which is an apt example of his views about religion and the act of human beings influenced by religion. He writes,

Masjid ddhaadey, Manderddhaadey,

Ddhaadeyjokuchhddhenda

Ikkisey da dil no ddhavein

Rabbdilaanvicchrehndaa.

In essence meaning,

Break down the Mosque, break down the Temple,

Break down whatever there is besides;

But never break a human heart

That is where God Himself resides.(158)

Thus, the writer opines that true religion is in upholding human values and nurturing humanity and oneness. He advocates through his writings in the book *Sex, Scotch & Scholarship* about Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Jainism, etc. that "All religions have a few

words believed to have powerful protective and creative potential. It is difficult to unravel the mystery behind them". (159)

His insightful reflections on religion and religious sentiments are not superfluous comments but are the result of a deep insight and analysis about the religious scriptures of various religions practised in the world, mostly the religions prevalent in India like Hinduism, Sikhism, Islam, Jainism, Buddhism, etc.. In the book *Khushwant Singh's India- An Introduction*, one can find detailed accounts from diverse literature from the various religious manuscripts. In three chapters of the book he has deeply scrutinized the four Vedas and the birth of Upanishads and has references from the great epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. He quotes references from these Holy Scriptures about the speculation of creation of universe and the idea of one supreme God who was creator, preserver and destroyer. He quotes thus, "The element of doubt echoes more clearly in the hymns to Prajapati (Lord of the peoples) wherein the author questions the supremacy of any one God. What God with our obligations shall we worship? (23), he asks at the end of each hymn."

His writings reflect his in-depth study of the teachings of various religions. His experience and understanding of his own religion Sikhism, gave birth to various books and writings on Sikhs and the History of Sikhs for which the Sikhs are indebted to him. His intrinsic analysis of the various religious scriptures and their religious practices only leads the writer to admit even more vigorously that religion ends up as a tool in the hands of a handful of politicians and religious leaders to rule over sentimental masses. He laments that though he was brought up as an orthodox Sikh of the Khalsa Panth, he later had questioned many practices and rituals practised by his own religion which lead to the study of his religion's scriptures. Various lectures delivered by him on Comparative Religions in American Universities gave him the opportunity to study the other religions. This kindled his curiosity to find the birth of the various religions and their religious practices and if they were true to what was envisaged by their founders.

The unending riots of communalism and each religion's proclamation to be messiah for all troubles only added fuel to the fire which resulted in the rise of incidences of clash of fundamental feuds: Hindus versus Muslims, Hindus versus Christians, Hindus versus Sikhs, etc. Khushwant Singh's lecture about Religion in London finds place in the book *Not A Nice Man to Know* forwarded by Vikram Seth. Witnessing the gruesome atrocities committed as a reaction to hurting of religious sentiments by the different communities on each other he expressed his fury thus, "I felt that it was time to take a second look at religions and, if possible, evolve one for myself and put it to others for consideration." (232) The writer though, had no intention to blaspheme any faith nor cause offence to anyone, wishes to enlighten the masses of the claims of each religion and shed the inhibitions of their respective followers. He feels that many of the religious traditions and rituals were born out of circumstances of the times and formulated by their founders to restrict their community from adultery of faiths. Extract from the book *Not A Nice Man to Know* gives proof of this fact where he states,

"That despite claims made by all religions that they enshrine eternal truths for all times to come, if you examine their teachings, the utterances of their profounders and their scriptural texts, it becomes abundantly clear that they were creatures of their own times and circumstances. Our religion should likewise take note of evils that have crept into our society, try to rectify them and incorporate all that is necessary to ensure a better life of the people.' Thus he concludes that "Belief in God is the fundamental basis of every religion and the keystone of its edifice." (233)

Khushwant Singh as a candid writer known for bold writings does not suppress his inhibitions about God and religion. He writes in his book *Truth, Love & A Little Malice*, "Most of my fears are due to my inability to accept the existence of God, life hereafter or the possibility of rebirth." (409). Though not an atheist, he feels that places of worship, without exception, have become places of commerce and some parasites in the form of some priests, pandas, pujaris, mullahs, mujawars, granthis and sages, exploit the sentiments of the god-fearing masses for their sustenance. He states "When people acquire vested interests in places of worship, these places become bones of contention and subject to litigation and, far too often, attempts are made to seize them by force." (234) He opines through his writings that the innocent masses are on a trickier ground when they describe "God as Omniscient, Omnipotent, Benign and Just." (234) It disheartens the writer to see that there exists so much injustice in the world and the innocent and god-fearing are burdened with such suffering that the purpose of believing in God and rituals, loses its divinity. He feels that in every religion, the founder ends up being more revered than God for the simple reason that the masses know a little more about their prophets, avatars, messiahs or gurus than they about God. He credits the followers responsible for dehumanizing them without any evidence on what kind of human beings their founders were. Thus, he is of the opinion that by deifying them the people have done gross injustice to them and to the society. His ultimate motive is to shed our hypocrisies and give the avatars and their prophets their place in history, simply, for their good deeds.

The writer dismisses the practice of religious sentiments and also believes that the legitimate place of worship could be one's home for introspection of self and repercussion of their actions. The writer opines that "these religious places have become arenas of contention and misused to propagate ideas other than those strictly religious." (235). He opines that religion through media is an explicit imposition on the masses which is against the law of the land. Religious activities that hinder the public life and provoke the sentiments of different religions, upsetting the public life – such as religious processions, blaring music, etc. - should be done away with according to Khushwant Singh. He has brought forth, in a subtle manner, the truth that religious hypocrisy only helps in losing one's morality – there are so many, who under the pretext of religion, commit atrocities on the innocent and god-fearing. In a land which has been the birth place of yogic practices, where huge masses of people are followers of such yogic practices and meditation, only a person like Khushwant Singh had the strength and the courage to raise doubts about such practices and denounce them for their hypocrisy. He opines that the practice of meditation, too, is a modern fad which has gained much acceptance among the public. He questions the claims of such practice to restore peace and calm by inducing the chakras. The literary laureate prefers and cites the example of statistical data in his book *Not A Nice Man to Know* to establish the fact that people have lost interest in the process which kindles intellectual thinking and creativity through the process of reading and contemplating on great literary works. He comments on this issue that "all the great works of art, literature, science and music were works of highly agitated minds, at times on the verge of collapse." (235)

Khushwant Singh is not dismissive about religion. In fact, it wouldn't be wrong to say that Khushwant Singh may be one of the very few writers in the globe who had taken up the seemingly herculean task of reading the various religious books like the Upanishads, the Vedas, the Bhagavad Gita, Guru Granth Sahib, books on Jainism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Parsis etc. All these, only to have a thorough knowledge of these books to point out the truth that lies in these books and to highlight the inherent contradiction of beliefs in the various religions. He took up the task of religiously reading these Holy Scriptures only to denounce the unreligious way of suppressing the thought process of the masses under the

guise of religion. The book *India An Introduction* with a detailed description of the various holy scriptures and quotations there from, is a testimony to the fact that Khushwant Singh's opinions are not baseless. Through his study of the various scriptures he tries to help the society to correct the perspective by deconstructing many commonly held fallacies. Through his lucid writings, he brings out the Beauty and significance of the Holy Books such as the Bhagavad Gita, the Quran and the Granth Sahib. He provides relevant extracts to highlight the poetry and the music in such books. The author next tries to dispel the prejudices held by many non-muslims against their Muslim compatriots by giving down-to-earth examples. In the book *Agnostic Khushwant- There is No God*, he begins the chapter thus,

"The Need for a New Religion - Without God" in which he questions the relevance of God. Then he moves on to describe how religion has proved to be more harmful than beneficial and in the process debunks astrologers and the breed of the so-called Godmen. (Agonistic Khushwant, web)

The writer feels that God has created man to test him by his good deeds and not by religious practice of one's religion. Commenting about this in his book *Not A Nice Man to Know* he writes, "There must be no coercion in matters of faith. And if God has so willed, he would have made you all single command; but he willed otherwise in order to test you by means of what he has vouched unto you, vie, then with one another in doing good deeds." (242)

The writer concludes that "the new religion of India should be based on a work ethic. He opines that such activities should be designed to recoup ones energies and provide leisure" and he discourages unproductive and uncreative pastimes in the name of religion. His motto is "Work is worship, but worship is not work." His idea of new religion "is positive replacement of our fundamentals of religions of our birth and upbringing, trying to remove the harmful, corrupt, time-wasting rituals which have emerged in the later periods." (242). The writer advises each and every individual to practice such a religion that the endeavour is not to hurt the sentiments of other human beings, but to preserve the environment. The new religion should be evolved considering the needs of the society and the country at present times and remedy for future ailments. Khushwant Singh has portrayed the essence of true religion in his *Not A Nice Man to Know* in beautiful words. He says,

Happiness is the only good; the place to be happy is here; the time to be happy is now; the way to be happy is to help others.' Quoting Ella Wheeler Wilcox's words he says, "So many gods, so many creeds, so many paths that wind and wind. When just the art of being kind, is all that the world needs." (243)

Ultimately, Khushwant Singh's endeavour to remove the veil of religion that has encased the masses, which brought him the ill repute of being a controversial writer did not deter his efforts to continue his task with more vigour and enthusiasm till end, displaying his indomitable spirit and strength in his writings, though age had rendered him weak. His spirit to give form to his thoughts of eradicating the evils of the society including hypocritical religious sentiments, rituals and traditions through his writings and in the columns of the newspapers can only bear fruit when the masses shed the veil of religion and take the baton from this renowned veteran to create a healthy society devoid of the hypocrisies of religious sentiments and god-men.

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