



Khushwant Singh's Use of Ancient Indian Techniques of Short Story Writing, and His Own Artistic Flavor

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Abstract - A short story is a narrative which is short but complete in itself, it has a proper beginning, middle and an end. But it does not simply mean a story that is short; it requires a particular kind of literary construction economy of words, short length. It fulfills the same purpose of presenting the "slice of life" through a miniature word-painting as novel does. It has to practice rigid unity with economy. Edgar Allan Poe said that it should be easily read at one sitting to preserve its unity of impression. It is not a quickie or a novel on a reduced scale. A short story has three characteristic elements. First, there should be the recognition of the familiar vivid details to create an illusion of reality short story is not a transcription of life but a dramatization of it. Second, it should arouse empathy meaning thereby that a reader should be able to identify himself with characters and situations. And third it should have readability – a fascinating story keeps the attention of the reader intact. There are some basic elements of a short story, it should have a formal plot or structure which should be spontaneous, and should not be either contrived or superfluous, and it ought to have a proper beginning and then a constant sense of movement. The nucleons Single effect story should be compressed, no digressions read at one setting. The short story uses a simple narrative account and by rearranging events in time arouses our curiosity and gives the story a meaning. A plot is artfully manipulated for artistic purposes to give pleasure and signify meaning. It is a matter of cause and effect which means a

story should be logically connected to make an organic whole almost like a novel. The plot is characters in action; various stages in plot are exposition, complication, climax and denouement. The plot of a short story is less a complication resolved than a situation revealed. The modern short story abandons orderly plots and photographic realism for more complex psychological realism.

Keywords : Narrative, Irony, Satire, Plot, Sarcasm, Ridicule, Chronicle, Realism.

Short story is usually the representation of the society and tells us about the society's various follies riding on some structural techniques. Irony and satire are such vehicles over which short story works effectively. Before discussing the stories let us know what these two terms mean. Satire is the use of humor and wit with a critical attitude, irony, sarcasm, or ridicule for exposing or denouncing the frailties and faults of mankind's activities and institutions, such as folly, stupidity, or vice. This usually involves both moral judgment and a desire to help improve a custom, belief, or tradition. The term satire has been taken from the Latin *satura*, meaning "full" or "sated" and was derived from *satis*, meaning "enough" or "sufficient." Satire began with the early Greek poets when they were supposed to tax weaknesses and correct vice. As a distinct literary form, satire was the creation of the Romans and was subsequently present in many forms of medieval literature. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer used this technique for "The Miller's Tale" and "The Nun's Priest's Tale." During the Renaissance, satire was more often prose rather than poetry. The Golden Age of Satire in England was the early Eighteenth Century when Henry Fielding, Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, John Gay and others dominated the British letters.

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the satire includes "The use of ridicule, irony sarcasm etc. to expose to folly or vice or to lampoon an individual." *Encarta World English Dictionary* defines the term satire as the use of wit, especially irony, sarcasm, and ridicule, to attack the vices and follies of humankind. *The Guide to English Literature* explains:

Satire is a form of attack through mockery; it may exist in any literary medium, but is often regarded as a medium in itself.... From ancient Roman culture two ideas of satire have come down to us: the first expresses a basic instinct for comedy through mockery in human beings, and was not invented by Romans; the second is a self-conscious medium, implying standards of civilized and moral rightness in the mind of the poet and hence a desire on his or her part to instruct readers so as to reform their moral failing, and absurdities. The two kinds of satires are inter-related, so that it is not possible to distinguish them sharply. (243)

John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Henry Fielding, Steele, and Addison are generally considered to be the main satirist of the Augustan Age or Neo-Classical Age of English literature. Henry Fielding in the preface to his novel *Joseph Andrews* explains in much clearer terms the eighteenth century theory of satire. While analyzing his theory of novel “as a comic epic in prose,” Fielding like Swift, argues that the main aim of the satirist is to expose “hypocrisy and affectation” in society or to expose the difference between what men are and what they think they are or claim to be. Fielding takes the exposition of the “ridiculous” as his special field in his comic epic, *Joseph Andrews* and its preface states that the only true source of the “ridiculous” is affectation, or pretense. This affectation according to him arises from one of the two causes, vanity or hypocrisy: the former affects a false character in order to gain applause, the latter covers vice by pretending to its opposite virtue. He notices that the ultimate source of this affectation can be vice, but only those effects of vice are proper object of ridicule that are accompanied by surprise and pleasure. From the above discussion it is clear that true satire, as it was used in the restoration and in the eighteenth century, is mainly inspired by the desire to correct or to reform—and not to belittle or degrade human beings.

Irony, on the other hand, is related to the outcome of the situation something which is not intended or the opposite of the intended conclusion. J. A Cuddon defines: “Irony is the perception or awareness of a discrepancy or incongruity between words and their meaning, or between actions and their results or between appearance and reality. It may contain an element of absurd and the paradoxical.” (331) I.A.Richards defines irony as “the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulse in order to achieve a balanced poise.” Irony has been defined, in Marriam Webster’s *Encyclopaedia of Literature*, as

The use of word to express, something other and especially the opposite of the literal meaning. Verbal irony arises from the sophisticated or resigned awareness of contrast between what is and what is ought to be and express the controlled pathos without sensibility” (589)

Oxford English Reference Dictionary, “Irony is an expression of meaning often humorous or sarcastic by the use of language of a different or opposite tendency.” According to Encarta World English Dictionary, it is “a type of humor based on using words to suggest the opposite of their literal meaning.”

There are various types of ironies like general irony, verbal irony, situational irony, cosmic irony, romantic irony and tragic irony. General irony aims at exposing hypocrisy, willful ignorance, pride, confident folly, vanity; verbal irony is used to convey something other than, and especially the opposite, of what the literal meaning of the words is ; situational irony implies to the situation when it is far different from what was expected; fate or cosmic irony which arises from sharp contrast between reality and human intentions and actual results; romantic irony deals with the

relationship between the forms of the world and the spirit or value invested in those forms and last but not the least tragic or dramatic irony is a device for heightening the effect of dramatic situation. Khushwant Singh in his short stories has usually adhered to situational and verbal irony.

Khushwant Singh's short story writing is like the style of satire used by Henry Fielding in his fiction. Henry Fielding, who is considered to be the pioneer of English novel, was a satirist to the core. Khushwant Singh presents his characters in the same way, he like Henry Fielding does not directly satirize one individual but he satirizes types and class of individuals. When he satirizes an individual for his adaption of English ways in his short story "Karma," he attacks all the people who behave in such a snobbish manner. As Henry Fielding confesses in his preface to *Joseph Andrews* And here I solemnly protest I have no intention to vilify or asperse any one; for though everything is copied from the book of nature, and scarce a character or action produced which I have not taken from my own observations and experience; ...that it is a foible only which the party himself may laugh at as well as any other. (52-53)

Khushwant Singh, bordering his short stories on Henry Fielding's style, does the same and presents life's shortcomings in a comic and humorous way. His attack is also on, "Much less are natural imperfection the objects of derision; but when ugliness aims at the applause of beauty, or lameness endeavours to display agility, it is then that these unfortunate circumstances, which at first moved our compassion, tend only to raise our mirth." (52) Khushwant has the tendency to laugh at himself in some of his short stories like "Bottom Pincher" and "Mark of Vishnu". He attacks not a single man but the types and classes same as Fielding describes in his chapter one of book third of *Joseph Andrews*:

I declare here, once for all, I describe not men, but manners; not an individual, but a species. ...This places the boundary between, and distinguishes the satirist from the libeler: for the former privately corrects the fault for the benefit of the person, like a parent; the latter publicly exposes the person himself, as an example to others, like an executioner. (218-19)

Short stories written by Khushwant Singh are the vignettes of the Indian culture, tradition and day to day life of urban and rural people. His stories can be seen as the chronicle of the Indian social, political, bureaucratic and emotional life. He comments upon almost everything under the sun, especially whatever is Indian. Long literary legacy spanning six decades brings uniqueness to his short stories – his first volume was published in 1950 and latest in 2008. But his chief concern remains the same, he satirizes to bring ignorance to an end; he creates humor to mock at the hypocritical behavior of the individuals. His first book of short stories entitled *The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories* was published in 1950. The stories in this volume, almost all vignettes of rural and urban Indian life, were little noticed at the time but have continued to be read and reprinted in India today; he was compared to Leo Tolstoy by some leading newspapers in India and abroad. His

second collection of short stories, *The Voice of God and Other Stories*, was published in 1957, which reflects Khushwant Singh's well-known puckish humor. In 1967, while he was in the US, his third collection of short fiction, *A Bride for the Sahib and Other Stories*, was published in India. Having continued to write fiction, he published his fourth collection of short stories, *Black Jasmine* in 1971.

In 2004, Khushwant Singh returns to the short story after decades to deliver a truly memorable collection *Paradise and Other Stories* which is humorous, provocative, tongue-in-cheek, ribald and even, at times, tender. He represents all; his short stories reveal different facets of the Indian culture and have a wide variety. He has written about almost everything which comprises of Indian culture, tradition, and day to day life. His short stories may broadly be divided into two categories depending upon the characters of his stories, urban and rural. Be it urban or rural, his vengeance falls upon everybody without any bias which makes him the ideal reviewer of society.

Khushwant Singh has been most admired and even more criticized among Indian writers in English. The idiosyncrasies for which his creative works have been disparaged are due to his excessive inclination towards sexual issues in his fictional as well as his nonfictional works. He proves himself a great social scientist and observer of human behavior with this tendency, Khushwant Singh himself portrays, quite explicitly, his responsibility as an 'ironist' and 'satirist' in the subsequent words:

Hate is my stronger passion. Mercifully, it has never been directed towards to community but only against certain individuals. I hate with a passion unworthy of anyone who would like to describe himself as civilized...This can be a terrible waste of time and money. I think I will have wax images of my pet hates and vent of spleen on them by sticking pins in their effigies. May the fleas of a thousand camel infest their armpits! (4-5, *Best of Khushwant Singh*)

Khushwant Singh is quite venomous and hit at the ills, duplicity and false affectation of the Indian society in his writing in general and short stories in particular in order to refurbish the society. In reality, his intense understanding of the human dilemma drove him into creative writing and encouraged him to deal with all, religious, economic, social, political and cultural problems that have caused affliction to the millions of Indians. With his dexterity and craftsmanship he has tried to create in the readers a crucial understanding of social evils and a need to castigate them. Nevertheless, it is a known fact that the writers in all the languages have their say on social, political, religious, and cultural absurdities or atrocities in a somber mood or in a humorous vein. Khushwant Singh adheres to the second alternative and mocks at their artificiality sardonically and ironically without deflating his job as an indisputable pragmatist.

Khushwant Singh reflects in his short stories a true realism and maintains a necessary detachment from romantic exaggeration. He portrays the pictorial reality which is inventively portrayed, a reasonable construal of life. He draws our consideration to incessant diligence to the social odds and afflictions in the society with the obligation of an idealist who has a zeal to reform the society. He also endeavors to suggest some curative measures which can refurbish the social order.

Khushwant Singh's short stories attempt to portray the concept of opposing dualities of appearance and reality. Khushwant Singh **perforates** into the core of stuff and cogitates on the oddities of the human circumstances. He shows through his literature, his deep rootedness in the Indian culture and his sense of belongingness to the nation. This realization impelled him to write short stories with societal ideas divulging different social ills since when the suffering is so intense and agonizing one, it becomes even more obligatory to check social instability by taking route of irony and satire.

Khushwant Singh's vision is essentially ironical: and even satire forms the key to his art of irony. He uses irony and satire as the tools to evaluate and to access contemporary society. Nevertheless, it is a clear fact that his being a 'satirical ironist' – in his modus operandi gives him an ample chance to criticize the existing norms of the contemporary society and makes him a sound technician of his craft, his observant eyes pierce through the thick flesh of human beings to see the reality, which is often disapproving. He is a skeptic living in an extremely religious, unsuspecting and susceptible country where, deceitfulness, hypocrisy, nepotism, communalism and politics prevail and exploitation of the powerless, innocent, illiterate and honest is inescapable. Khushwant Singh's themes are usually the hypocrisies of the society. He attacks superstitions, illiteracy, religious fundamentalism, orthodoxy, dowry, pretensions, pompousness, and other social ills.

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