

# Khuswant Singh's *Black Jasmine and other Stories*: Strains of Modernity

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Art is an expression of spontaneity and short story as a genre is a perfect example of it, although lyric poetry arrived on the scene of literature earlier. Although there is no exact date but it is certain that stories of some sort were told from the time man began to articulate. The short story is one of the most spontaneous and one of the most entertaining of literary forms that has developed considerably during the recent years. For ages in each and every country of the world, stories have been in existence in one or the other form, e.g. anecdotes, jokes and brief narratives. If we look into the history of any literature in the world, we find stories in different forms. For example, fables, parables, allegories, ballads as well as the folk tales that dealt with legendary heroes or with magic and enchantment. We find, in India, stories of the *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesh* and in the West Aesop's fables as well as the tales of the *Old Testament* and *Apocrypha*. Stories in the *Arabian Nights* and Boccaccio's *Decameron* are some other examples of this art.

Thus, the history of the short story has passed through many stages, the chief among them being myth, legend, fable, parable as well as the novella. In form, content and technique, of course, the old stories differ a lot from the modern short stories. However, the fact is that this form is traceable to the classical romance and has developed through such medieval types as 'fabliaux', 'novella' and 'exemplum'. When looked at the stories in the old time and the modern period, the difference is startling. The crude narrative of old has given place to a sophisticated story throbbing with human interest written in a style that is quite polished and artistic. In a way, the short story has followed the march of human civilization and has become one of the cultured means of expression. Though short story has not or ever will be allowed to die, the mode itself has been neglected over time. The Elizabethans preferred drama, the eighteenth century the Romantic poem, the Victorians the novel.

The short story as a literary form has become an ever growing aspect of Indian literature ever since Indian writers started experimenting with their newly found literary genre. The short story has now taken deep roots in all the languages of India and has blossomed considerably well. This form has its roots in ancient Indian Literature. But it has also been shaped by the impact of modern Western masters of this genre.

India is one of the very few countries with an ancient tradition in storytelling...depicting with kaleidoscopic colours and patterns the soil and life of India. (Jagmohan 1) The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the fables and parables in the *Panchatantra*, the *Jataka Tales* and the *Kathasaritsagara* and the folk tales of India are a fascinating world of stories by themselves.

According to Manjri Isvaran:

India was the nursery of story and fable and the Indian story-teller was as fertile in tales inculcating practical wisdom as in illuminating epic and religious myth. (Isvaran ii)

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Both the ancient Indian fable and the ancient Indian popular tale have helped the Indian short story writer in giving his stories a definite shape. They have been influenced by the ancient literature. According to Manjri Isvaran, earlier this form of literature was described variously as *katha*, *akhyan*, *upakyan*, *afsana* and *dastan*. Today the short story as a form is considered as the youngest child of modern literature, though it has its roots in ancient India.

Indian English literature with its rich and revitalising literature has earned accolades from all over the world. Indian writers in English have been using almost all forms of literature. If one looks into the history of Indian short story in English it can be said to have begun to take definite shape in the 1920s, and thus within a span of ninety years its development so far indicates a distinct possibility of its becoming one of the most significant forms in the field of Indian writing in English.

The major Indian English short story writers to contribute to this genre include Shankar Ram, A.S.P. Ayyar, Manjri Inshvaran, Humayun Kabir, G.V. Desani, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, K.A. Abbas, Manohar Malgaokar, Khuswant Singh and others. Khushwant's biggest attribute is that sometimes he appears to be blunt for many, although he speaks what he feels. It is his *magnum opus* novel *Train to Pakistan* which earned him his name and fame but the fact that his modernist approach in short story writing and using the irony and satire effectively in his short stories makes him stand apart from his contemporary writers. The fact that cannot be denied is that in Indian literary history Khushwant Singh's name is inscribed as one of the finest novelists, short story writers, political commentators, and social critics. This paper attempts to trace certain traits of modernism in Khuswant Singh's *Black Jasmine* (1972). Some of the stories in *Black Jasmine* were already published in *The Mark of Vishnu and other stories* (1950).

The earliest influence on Khushwant Singh was that of his grandmother. He was extremely close to her and continued to share the same room with her till he was nineteen years old. He has written a poignant short story about her entitled, *The Portrait of a Lady*. She would constantly be engaged in reciting the Holy Scriptures 'The Granth Sahib' and 'Sukhmani', 'the psalm of peace'. This greatly influenced Singh and probably triggered his interest in religion. This perhaps led him to later specialize in Sikhism. He translated the Sikh morning prayer 'Japji', composed by Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. He also wrote a book entitled, *The Sikhs*.

In spite of close association with the British, because of professional needs, Khushwant Singh remained true to his Indian roots and was contemptuous of the wogs, an abusive term for Asians, or the westernized oriental gentlemen. This is expressed in his various stories like the memorable, *Karma*. As Vasant. A. Sahane rightly points out:

Khushwant Singh's art and mind are permeated by a genuine Punjabi consciousness. His art is deeply rooted in the soil deriving vitality from the vigorous energy that characterizes a Punjabi. Unlike the work of some other Indo-Anglian writers, his writing has grown out of the grass roots of the social milieu. (Dhawan 36)

One of the hallmarks of Khuswant Singh that makes him one of the greatest Indian short story writers is that he has mostly written about what he is personally acquainted with. His personal experience, close association, and intimate knowledge about the subject taken up, always comes through in all his fiction.

Khushwant Singh's art of writing short story contains the modernist characteristics of the early twentieth century. He is considered to be a man who is real and at the same time humane and this picture of him is revealed in his short stories. His short stories reveal his gentle irony and his faculty of being ironical on the part of his countrymen. Irony forms one of the basic characteristics in his style of story writing. Irony in its literal sense is considered as a device with dual or two meaning: One the literal or actual meaning and the second which bring other meaning in the sentence or situation than the actual one, in other words Irony is the word that says one thing but means another.

The story, "The Mark of Vishnu", is one of the remarkable and appreciated short story in Indian English Literature. One of the most important characteristics of modernism apart from the use of irony and satire that Khuswant Singh has used in this particular short story is the rejection of religion. The very title is weighed by the religious values, but the irony of the title is revealed through the story from which the author mocks at the superstitious Indian. In this story, a Hindu devotee, Ganga Ram, has much belief in black cobra generally called Kala Nag. Ganga Ram, like many Hindus, considers Kala Nag to be a deity. Ganga Ram is a pious and devoted Brahmin, and, as a mark of Hindu worship of Kala Nag (Shesh-Nag), he used to pour milk in a saucer for the Nag. He shows great faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh (or Shiva), the Creator, the Preserver and the Destroyer gods respectively. As his symbol of faith, he wears a "V" mark on his forehead with the sandalwood paste. One day a black-hooded, six feet long, rounded and fleshy cobra is seen on a rainy morning. As soon as some school children see the snake, they surround him and hit him on the hood. The Nag reaches a state of pain and agony due to the wound on his hood, it is reduced in "squish squashy pulp of black and white jelly, spattered with blood and mud". (Singh 30) The children then lift the cobra on a Bamboo stick and later place it in a small tin box, and tie it with a rope. They take the box, the very next day, to present it to the science teacher. As soon as the lid of the tin is opened, the Nag comes out with bloodshot eyes, surveying the scene. He, by a hiss and forked tongue, makes a dart, he also wants to leave the place but his wounded belly does not allow him to move. But somehow he manages to drag his body to the door as his back is broken but his hood remains undamaged. Ganga Ram waits on the door with a saucer in his hands, and as soon as he sees the nag, he places the saucer in front of him. After placing the saucer he himself sits on his knees on the floor in orders to pray to the Nag to forgive the school children for their misbehaviour. The Nag, in fury, bite Ganga Ram all over his body, the teacher wipes the blood droplets from his foreheads & sees a "V" mark, where Kala Nagas dug his fangs. This story has placed and structured with irony. Irony is implied through the title itself. The title is symbolic as "The Mark of Vishnu" means the divine function of preservation of life on Earth. But here the irony, the "Mark of Vishnu is implied as the 'mark of snake bite'. In Hindu religion the devotees of Vishnu (the preserver), called the Vaishnavaites, normally bear three straight stripes of sandalwood

on their forehead. But Ganga Ram places a “V” mark on his forehead instead of three straight stripes, it shows that though the practice of bearing a three stripes of sandalwood is symbol of devotion of Vishnu, the preserver; but here the “V” mark acts as a symbol of devotion to Kala Nag(snake), the destroyer, and the mark of his fangs is also of “V” shape. The story reaches no end; the author leaves the end to be decided by the readers.

The other story by Mr. Singh, in *Black Jasmine* is “The Voice of God” which is representative of both verbal and situational irony, makes the title, meaning and structure of the story ironical as a whole. It is a tale of the people of two villages in Punjab, Bhamba Kalan and Bhamba Khurd, both cool places where nothing unpleasant happens but the peaceful life of the people is disturbed by the election flue and gale of politics. Mr. Forsythe, an English deputy commissioner arrives at Bhamba apparently on an official visit but his actual visit is to campaign for Ganda Singh, who previously helped British Government by subjugating the present agitation and the Congress movement, in his bid for Punjab Assembly election. Ganda Singh is a chief of dacoits and thugs, as is said in the story, “his men robbed with impunity and shared the proceeds with the police”. (Singh 14) Mr. Forsythe praises Ganda Singh and appreciates his work and pretends him as a pride of the district. The people hate Ganda Singh for his in human activities and injustice to the people. After the speech Ganda Singh distributes sweet to Zaildars, Lambardars and Village Officers in reference to their promise to vote for him in the election. His rival in the election is Kartar Singh, who is a Nationalist nominee and an advocate by profession. Seth Sukhtankar, a millionaire, who is involved in cloth business and owns cloth mills, supports him. He calls the people for a meeting to convince them, “if 400 million Indians united and spat in a tank, there would be enough spit to drown the entire English population in India.” (Singh 17) This comment by Mr. Singh reveals his deep irony and humour when he says, “But somehow the facilities for such a mass suicide had never been provided.” (Singh 17)

One more contestant Baba Ram Singh is found who is a devoted worker among poor peasants who calls himself a *kisan* (an ordinary farmer). Polling takes place on the specific date and Sardar Ganda Singh is declared elected over his nearest rival Sardar Kartar Singh by a margin of 2,220 votes. Baba Ram Singh not only loses election but also forfeits his deposit. On this occasion the comment by Mr. Singh shows deep irony and humour, when he says, “The people had spoken. The voice of the people is the Voice of the God”. (Singh 20) Here the disbelief and hypocrisy of the people is shown by the ironical comment. During the time of election their values are subsided by the pressure of the contestants and once the person is elected he behaves as a Mini-God and forgets his promises and views made to the people.

Another short story, *Karma*, reveals the psychology of an educated Indian in British India and his character is presented in an ironical way, this character helps the author to present his irony for such people. Sir Mohan Lal’s encounter with the mirror shows the values of such Indians, their indifference and varied native feelings. The mirror is Indian made and “the red oxide of its back had come off at several places and long lines of translucent glass cut across its surface”. (Singh 21) This comment is an ironical example of Indians with British likings in British Raj. The mirror is a symbol of

everything Indian and native, inefficient and indifferent, dirty and intolerable to Mohan Lal. In this incidence Mr. Singh, fully and in fine manner, shows his irony for the Indians in British Government. Mohan Lal wears the suit tailored at Saville Row, the symbol of British aristocracy and upper class Culture; and Balliol tie, a symbol of exclusive Oxford upbringing and educated human being. He is married to Lachmi - who is ironically being called Lady Mohan Lal by the author but she has no resemblance to her husband. Sir Mohan Lal is depicted as an educated Indian in contrast to his illiterate wife. In an incidence the harsh irony of the author is depicted when Sir Mohan Lal in suit and tie is presented sitting in a first class waiting room, quietly sipping his "Ek Chota". (Singh 20) While his wife, a fat and an illiterate woman is found eating chapattis and pickles and chewing betel leaves while sitting on a steel trunk on the platform. Sir Mohan Lal travels in first class compartment along with all educated and well placed people, whereas his illiterate wife is adjusted in ladies general class compartment. The later half of the incidence is full of ironical behaviour of the people with both Mrs. and Mr. Mohan Lal. Later the train arrives and both are adjusted in their respective coaches, Sir Mohan Lal enters in first class compartment and Lady Mohan Lal in a general ladies compartment. As soon as he enters in the compartment he does not even find a single person in it, but, after some time, two English soldiers arrive, one soldier say to another to let him down. And they start shouting at Mohan Lal, "Ek Dum Jao" - get out!" (Singh 25) They lift his suitcase and throw it out on the platform. The train starts moving and they pull him by his arms and throw him out of the compartment. The irony of his fate is presented here, as he lay on the platform after humiliation whereas his wife is found comfortable in inter-class compartment. As, "the train speed post the lighted part of the platform, Lady Lal spat and sent a jet of red dribble flying across like a dirt"! (Singh 26) This action of lady Lal is presented as a victory of a simple Indian woman over an educated arrogant and proud Indian who pretends to be foreigner.

The title story *The Black Jasmine* is, no doubt, a bawdy story, which betrays Khushwant Singh's predilection for the risqué. Yet, it offers one of the best illustrations of comic irony reinforced by irony of situation. When the protagonist of this story Mr. Bannerjee was in Sorbonne pursuing higher studies, a curvaceous African girl Martha Stack became friendly with him. Since she was quite a smasher, the other male students were almost envious of Mr. Bannerjee. One day in a highly romantic mood she offered herself but ironically Mr. Bannerjee, who had wasted many hours on daydreaming the way he would seduce her, failed to seduce her. Nearly thirty years after this incident Martha who is "one enormous mass of hulking flesh" (Singh 9) comes to India as a tourist and meets an old and worn- out Mr. Bannerjee. Ironically, Mr. Bannerjee now decides to make up for the earlier failure.

The missed passion warms up his limbs under the influence of liquor and overwhelms his senses. Khushwant Singh's remarkable technical skill is evident in *Black Jasmine* which deals with a single passion of unromantic sexual exploration. The whole story centres on the single character Martha. The one and only action that Mr. Bannerjee undertakes is to seduce Martha and this he accomplishes at an unexpected moment. There is no digression or diversion. As a result, there is no flagging of interest.

All his stories have a rounded perfection. "The Portrait of a Lady", "The Fawn" and "A Punjab Pastoral" with their rich suggestion can stand comparison with any story of the masters in this field. Khushwant Singh, in spite of his several interesting stories, is known as a novelist, a columnist and a controversial chronicler of history. His stories provide another aspect of his creative genius. His selection of themes, bold characters and treatment of language make him a prominent modern short story writer in English.

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