



# Social Realism and Its Manifestations in The Selected Novels of Khushwant Singh

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## Abstract

The present research paper explores the subtle shades of social realism in the chosen novels of Khushwant Singh which are Train to Pakistan, Delhi, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, The Company of Women, and The Sunset Club. Singh is one of the most recognizable authors of Indian English literature who makes use of an unsophisticated journalistic narrative style to address the harsh realities of Indian society, such as Partition trauma, religious intolerance, gender roles, moral decay and the alienation of the marginalized groups. His characters, who are members of different classes of society, villagers, sex workers, old companions, political rebels, are used to point out the flaws of the system, contradictions of the culture, and the everyday battles of the common people. The study takes on historic, analytical, explorative and comparative methods to track the progress of the realist vision of Singh in the diverse socio-political contexts thereby enabling the reader to have an interesting critique of the personal and national identity. With irony, satire and raw emotionalism Singh goes beyond conventional storytelling to provide a literature that is a mirror of the Indian society as well as a critique of the evils of Indian society.

**Keywords:** Social realism, Khushwant Singh, Partition, communal violence, gender norms, moral decay, Indian English fiction, marginalized voices.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social realism in literature aims to show the actual state of life and particularly the problems of the marginalized. The genre has become an effective literary weapon in the Indian context in times of and after the British colonial rule, addressing social stratification, poverty, gender disparity, and political exploitation. Khushwant Singh, a giant in the Indian English fiction, uses this realism with a brutal honesty. His characters are human but imperfect, and they tend to reflect the sociopolitical unrest of their epoch. In his storytelling manner and his thematic transparency, Singh criticizes the existing social order and endorses the possibility of personal salvation and social cohesion.

The realism of the work by Singh is founded in his career experiences as a lawyer, journalist, historian and parliamentarian, which have given him a complex view of Indian life. Unlike idealist or romanticized representations of India, Singh is usually uncomfortable in his realism—he reveals the stench beneath religious institutions, political structures, and social hierarchies. In his writings, such as Train to Pakistan and Delhi, he shows the imprint of historical trauma, especially Partition, on the national identity and individual relationships. Singh is also a realist who is opposed to elitism; he speaks up on behalf of ordinary people villagers, prostitutes, hijras, retired civil servants who reflect the various and frequently ignored realities of India.

### 1.1. Research Objectives

- To determine the social realism with particular emphasis to the novel Train to Pakistan.
- To analyze the social realism with particular emphasis to the novel Delhi.
- To explore the social realism with special attention to the novel I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale.
- To analyze the social realism having particular emphasis on the novel The Company of Women.
- To discuss the social realism with particular attention to the novel The Sunset Club.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Neeru Arora (2017)** discussed the contentious gender in sexual identity assertions by dwelling on the term queer and non-normative sexualities. The acceptance of the third gender by the Supreme Court under the LGBTQ category defied the two gender nature of man and woman in the Indian law. This decision was an outcome of decades-long LGBTQ activism that shattered the silence of society regarding various sexualities. Indian writers such as Khushwant



Singh in the 1990s broke gender norms in works such as *Delhi*, which portrayed the visibility of non-normative people and their socialization, unlike the typical queer fiction literary pattern of gender-queer characters being secretive or social recluses.

**Sukhdev Singh Dhanju and Priya Saroj (2019)** illustrated the way the Partition of India had a significant effect on the society and the art of creation. This is seen in such novels as the *Heart Divided*, *Ice Candy Man*, *Clear Light of Day*, *Azadi*, *A bend in the Ganges* and *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh. Another post-colonial English writer is Singh who was a diplomat, editor, and historian. Sulabh International gave him the award of the Honest Man of the Year in recognition of his daring and rib-tickling writing. *Train to Pakistan* eloquently captured the violence and political tension of Partition, which were credited as classic on the topic by Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh.

**Kavit, P., and B. Visalakshi (2020)** observed that Khushwant Singh was a talented writer, pundit and journalist. He had seen a lot of women in his life but in his first novel which was *Train to Pakistan* there were not so many female characters. Their piece of work was a critical analysis of how women are described in *Train to Pakistan* and the intention was also to show both the positive and negative images of women in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* and *Delhi*. Nooran who was the Muslim girl loved by Juggat Singh was portrayed as a beautiful woman and the mother of Juggat was also portrayed as intelligent and kind. Hasseena, the young friend of Hukum Chand was depicted as a sluttish girl who had no value other than sex. There were women who were portrayed as helpless beings. Bhagmati was presented as a zealous prostitute in *Delhi*, and Kamala was portrayed as an isolated character. Shabhrai in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* was made out to be a strict and a traditional woman whereas Champak in the novel was an obnoxious and rude character.

**Charyulu Gomatam Mohana et al.(2021)** noted that the tragic riots after Partition of India motivated and inspired many creative minds in Pakistan and India. The most noticeable medium of sharing the emotional and political essence of the divide was literary circles. Some of the works described the atrocities experienced in the refugee crisis whereas others depicted the plight of the migrants on each side of the border. The dreams and feelings related with Partition haunted the citizens of both countries even after 74 years of separation. The human cost of independence was so terrible that it was manifested in fictional accounts. Their article highlighted the tragedy of Partition in the novel *Train to Pakistan*, written by Khushwant Singh in 1956, and how the scenes and events of the novel still impacted the collective memory of the people even decades after Partition.

**Sangeeta Mittal (2017)** claimed that the setting, traditions and memories of a city served as historical landmarks. The cultural montage of the city, which was not as conventional and standardized as it used to be, consisted of individual memories mostly. The artistic contribution of the individuals in the vibrant contemporary cities created a lot of memory concerning the city because memory remembered a lot about the changing identity of the city. The paper sought to investigate the connection between the city and memory in the interdisciplinary approach of memory studies with reference to the novel *Delhi* by Khushwant Singh. *Delhi*, which Singh refers to as a cultural biography, uses a number of colourful mnemonic devices to seize the essence of ever-changing metropolis. By the appearance of the novel, a new generation of writers was launched, the writers who had spent much of their life in Delhi or New Delhi, and who started to see the city through the lens of their hometown where the stories about the city and the self were united. It was a re-creation of a mediated space of memory and identity, which was virtually a step back in time to the early part of Delhi in a bid to come to terms with its numerous losses.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study research methodology combines historic, analytical, explorative, and comparative approaches. The purpose is to measure the existence and extent of social realism of the chosen novels by Khushwant Singh through the themes, characterization and narrative style depicting the real-life situations in the Indian society.



### 3.1. Selection of Research Topic

The research topic which is Social Realism in the Selected Novels of Khushwant Singh was selected following a thorough examination of the available literature in Indian English fiction. Although Partition literature and postcolonial narratives have been studied at length, little academic focus has been devoted specifically to the uniform social realism observed in the major novels of Singh. Train to Pakistan, Delhi, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, The Company of Women and The Sunset Club were selected because of their diversity in themes and their sociopolitical relevance.

### 3.2. Primary and Secondary Data

The main data consisted of a textual analysis of the five novels in an in-depth manner. The characters, the structure of the plot, dialogues, and the tone of the narrative were analyzed to determine the most important manifestations of social realism. The secondary sources of data used were academic journals, research articles, literary reviews, interviews with authors and online archives such as Google Scholar and institutional repositories. The findings of the research were supported by the key references to the contemporary critiques and comparative literary analyses.

### 3.3. Selection of Research Tools

These data were collected and analyzed using the following tools:

- Rare critical works library resources and archives
- Digital databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar of modern criticism
- Turnitin and Quillbot to check originality and paraphrase
- Contextual insight of the author through interviews and public talks
- Thematic analysis, character plot and social context framing.

### 3.4. Methodological Approach

This study is historical in its effort to examine the social and political contexts of the respective novels, analytical in its ability to deconstruct literary techniques and character roles, exploratory in its ability to unearth themes that have not been addressed as much as they should have been like gender non-conformity and moral decay, and comparative in its assessment of the patterns that are present in several works. Using the lens of cross-textual analysis, the study will set out to determine how the literary realism depicted by Singh has been changing with time and how it continues to remain relevant even in different historical situations.

### 3.5. Hypothesis and Data Interpretation

The main theory is that the social realism used by Singh in his novels is always employed to criticize and not only to describe the Indian society. Close reading methods were used to analyze the collected data, especially in regard to the socio-political situations present in the setting of each of the novels. Trends of religious conflict, gender, aging, sexuality and morality were monitored and analyzed in sync with the goals of the research.

## 4. SOCIAL REALISM IN THE SELECTED NOVELS

The chosen novels by Khushwant Singh are bright examples of social realism expressed in the themes of Partition trauma, historical memory, gender norms, moral dilemmas, and aging. Both the novels represent the social-political complexities of India in an ordinary life in an extraordinary situation.

### 4.1. Train to Pakistan

The novel is set in a fictional village of Mano Majra and the theme of trauma of Partition is captured through the theme of destruction of communal harmony by political violence. Singh introduces such characters as Jugga and Iqbal that stand in opposite moral and ideological approaches. The power of the novel is in the fact how it demonstrates the worst and the best of the human nature, how it represents the ordinary people caught in the extraordinary situations. The train serves as a focal image--a means of death and salvation. Singh employs realistic dialogs, local setting and psychology of fear and compassion to show a microcosm of the India during the Partition.

### 4.2. Delhi

The novel gives a panoramic report of Delhi since the 14th century and after independence in



India. The multifaceted identity of the city is on display through a dual narrative perspective that tries to mingle history and personal memory presented by Singh. This love affair of the protagonist with a hijra sex worker Bhagmati is outside gender and enhances the social realist texture of the novel. Singh contrasts decadence and vulgarity, authority and Second-Class Citizen, heritage and insurgency. Delhi is not just a backdrop; it is an alive, breathing creation which was affected by invasions and revolution, as well as normal people living their lives.

#### 4.3. I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale

The novel is based in the Punjab province which was then under British rule and ends up focusing on the life of Sabhrai, a woman with strong spiritual groundings who becomes the moral handrail of her family whose politics had been at loggerheads. Whereas her son is willing to die in the course of performing violent actions that lead to nationalism, the Sikh ethic of compassion and duty is evident in Sabhrai as the daughter is quiet and resilient. Singh reproaches the repression of colonization process and male self-confidence and emphasizes feminine power and ethical firmness. The novel immerses itself in the metaphysics of Sikhs, who give the novel an ethical yardstick to evaluate the characters in the novel.

#### 4.4. The Company of Women

This novel looks daringly at male sexuality, desire and social hypocrisy. The prologue portrays Mohan Kumar, the protagonist, who in search of sexual freedom, ends up morally and physically degenerating; eventually being diagnosed with HIV. Such a personal tale allows Singh to comment in this story on social taboo pertaining to sex, a value of women as a commodity, and capitalism in his/her approach to modern relationships. The story, with its provoking style, is also a lesson of what careless passions and lack of feelings can lead to.

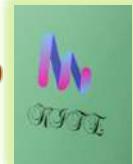
#### 4.5. The Sunset Club

This retrospective novel presents three elderly friends (Hindu, Muslim and Sikh) who gather to spend their daily time in Lodhi Gardens. In their dialogues, Singh provides criticism to modern politics, breakdown of secularism, and decline of urban life. Themes of old age; friendship, illness, and memory are set against the realistic description of the life in India in the era of the post-liberalization. What makes the novel very strong is its realistic approach towards the issue of mortality and its praise of eternal human relationships.

### 5. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS

The novels by Khushwant Singh provide a range of social problems, which are associated with truthfulness and sincerity. Whereas Train to Pakistan and Delhi are about the historical violence and communal tension, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale and The Sunset Club are about moral strength and wisdom of generations. The Company of Women, despite the change of tone, is consistent with the intentions of Singh to reveal the secrets of the society. Singh links realism with satire, eroticism, and spirituality in all these works to capture the two sides of Indian life. In Train to Pakistan, Singh does not describe the horrors of Partition in the form of big political speeches but he does it through the life of simple people of a small village. The power of the novel is in the way it demonstrates the way in which historical processes enter the ordinary, disturbing the balance and confidence. Delhi, however, is more of a historical chronicle in a personal approach with centuries of conquest, lust, and betrayal that define the Indian psyche. These two novels are complementary to each other- Train to Pakistan is local and intense, Delhi is big and intersexual- but both of them criticize the inability of communal unity to resist the political manipulation.

By contrast, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale and The Sunset Club are inner battles with social and political corruption. The matriarch Sabhrai in I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale is a contrast to the bloodthirsty ambition of her son and is a symbol of silent spiritual power. In the same way, in The Sunset Club, the three friends, who are old-timers, discuss their lives in a reflective manner and this casually depicts the moral and social changes in India over decades. These novels transfer the center of attention off the external struggle to the internal conscience, and it seems that the opposition to the decadence of the society may be moral and self-reflective as well. Overall, the comparative vision of Singh traces a single line, that of realism, reflection, and resistance, across the various periods and emotional landscapes of the Indian society.



## 6. NARRATIVE STYLE AND UNIQUENESS

The style of Singh is direct, journalistic, and very human. He often alternates the first person and the third person narration. His narration is full of irony, humor and rough sensuality. In contrast to idealized nationalistic histories, Singh prefers to point out vices of the Indian society whether it is communal enmity, bureaucratic apathy or gender discrimination. His humanist philosophy, which was influenced by the Sikh philosophy, is still a mainstay of ethical forces in his fictions.

Singh does not only recount events; he makes experiences that put the reader into the emotional and psychological world of his characters. His realist tools are grounded in the truth-to-life-truth-to-place, truth-to-dialect, and truth-to-dilemma. In Delhi, as an example, Singh breaks the chronological time frame and uses a multi-voiced narrative, mixing historical characters with fictional journeys. The narrator and Bhagmati, a hijra sex worker, are in a relationship, which is a daring literary decision, not only because it transgresses the gender boundaries but also because it expands the range of marginalized identities in Indian fiction. Such boldness in covering taboo topics is part of the signature of the literature of Singh.

In addition, Singh is not subtle in the use of satire. In *The Company of Women*, he does not only criticize male sexual overindulgence but also the social-cultural taboo over female sexuality and illness. His characters are never idealized, they are blemished, lustful, ambitious, and fearful or filled with faith, but they are always human. In *The Sunset Club*, Singh combines wisdom and wit, as the trio of old men discusses love, death and politics in the setting sun. With a sparse but mighty dialogue and scene description, Singh makes even the most basic scene, such as an old man sighing over wasted youth, have a philosophical resonance. It is this quality of mixing the personal and the political, the vulgar and the sublime that marks Khushwant Singh as an author who stands out in the pantheon of Indian English writing.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The choice of novels by Khushwant Singh can be regarded as the strong examples of social realism in the Indian English literature, which provide deep insights into the realities of people in various historical and cultural contexts. His stories explore the themes of Partition, religious intolerance, gender and sexuality, as well as moral decline and they are not about great heroes, but about average individuals struggling with great social and political change. *Train to Pakistan* and *Delhi* are novels that look at the traumatic scars of Partition and the complex history of the capital of India, whereas *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* and *The Sunset Club* are the products of the inner moral struggles of people who resist the corruption of society by preserving inner strength and contemplation. *The Company of Women* with its outrageous attack on male desire and social hypocrisy also widens the domain of Singh realism. The commonality of these disparate tales is the unique narrative voice of Singh, which is direct, candid, satirical and deeply human, as well as his determination to portray the India of the marginalized, imperfect and yet intensely human individuals. His courage to incorporate taboo subjects, his journalistic style, and his philosophical overtones that were based on Sikh humanism, makes his works a step above storytelling: a kind of social reportage. It is this mixture of realism, irony and empathy that makes Singh ask the reader to face the unpleasant truth and develop a literature that not only mirrors Indian society but also criticizes and motivates it to introspect and change.

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