

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 6 : 4 April 2006

Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Associate Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.
Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.
B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.
A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.
Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

**IRONY AS AN INTRINSIC FEATURE
IN SHORT STORIES BY KHUSHWANT SINGH**

Ritu Benjamin, Ph.D.

IRONY AS AN INTRINSIC FEATURE IN SHORT STORIES BY KHUSHWANT SINGH

Ritu A. Benjamin, Ph.D.



Khushwant Singh

(Courtesy: <http://www.sikh-heritage.co.uk/writers/khushwantS/khushwant.htm>)

IRONY, A BASIC CHARACTERISTIC OF KHUSHWANT SINGH'S STYLE

Khushwant Singh as a short story writer pursues and follows the art of short story as in its early twentieth century. He is considered as a realist and humanist in one, and this picture of him is revealed in his stories. The 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. Irony arises due to the interrelation between these two states of meaning, since one state seems to negate the other one and this contrast assume a striking effect.

Irony in Khushwant Singh's is sometimes expressed by a sentence expressing different thing than what is said. It also arises from a discrepancy between the expression and realization. Even sometimes the character and situation as seen are different from what they mean. These types of description in all make the work ironical.

“THE VOICE OF GOD”

The first story by Mr. Singh, “The Voice of God” in the first collection, “The Voice of God and Other Stories,” is representative of both verbal and situational irony, which makes the title, meaning and structure of the story ironical in a whole. It is a tale of people of two villages in Punjab, Bhamba Kalan and Bhamba Khurd, its 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”.¹

Mr. Forsythe praises Ganda Singh and appreciates his work and pretends him as a pride of the district. Though the people hate Ganda Singh for his inhuman 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 owes 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.” 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.”²

One more contestant Baba Ram Singh is found who is a devoted worker among poor peasants who call 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”.³

Here the disbelief and hypocrisy of the people is shown by the ironical comment. During the time of election there 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.

“KARMA”

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”. 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”.⁴

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.

IRONY OF SIR MOHAN LAL’S LIFE AND TIMES

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” (Go at Once). But it is late for Mohan Lal to protest in his Oxonian accent! 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 past the lighted part of the platform, Lady Lal spat and sent a jet of red dribble flying across like a dirt”!

This action of lady Lal is presented as a victory of a simple Indian woman over a learned, arrogant and proudly Indian man, who pretends to be foreigner. It brings the ironical contrast with the most unexpected defeat of a person who suffers humiliation and misery by those whom he appreciates as his ideals.

The character of Mohan Lal is presented in such a manner that he suffers such ironical defeat in two days. Firstly, he suffers at the hands of two British soldiers whom he admires so much that he does not even wish to maintain the husband - wife relationship. He does each and everything to present himself as a Britisher, for which he does not like the company of his wife. He wishes to travel in first class and let her wife travel in general compartment. Even with so much sacrifice he is not able to get that position among Britishers as he wished to get. Therefore, by this incidence, the author successfully reveals the irony of a man (Mohan Lal) who suffers at the hands of those whom he tried to imitate, but it results only in humiliation.

THE KARMA OF SIR MOHAN LAL’S AGONY

Secondly though he does a lot of labour to assume himself as a Britisher, he forgets his native values; Indian dressing sense; even challenges the strong bond of marriage, which for Indians is life-time commitment, but the result is that neither he becomes a real Britisher nor a real Indian. He loses pride and dignity of an Indian among Indians as well as Britisher, the equality and understanding between man and women, which is the basic element in Western civilization, is absent in their husband-wife relationship. This nemesis is the result of his actions and thoughts.

The title “Karma” has double meaning the nemesis and the ironical turn of fate. What he wishes to attain are turned in other direction, which is made possible because of his karma.

THE MARK OF VISHNU

The story, “The Mark of Vishnu”, is one of the remarkable and highly appreciated stories among Indo-Anglican Stories. The 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 “squishy-squashy pulp of black and white jelly, spattered with blood and mud”.⁵

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 order to pray to the Nag to forgive the schoolchildren for their misbehavior. 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 Nag has dug his fangs.

This story has ironically been placed and structured. 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 Vaishnavites, 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. (This is one way of explaining the practice. In south India the three and two stripes may signify different sects among the worshippers of Vishnu.)

Therefore, Kushwant sees some irony in the practice of snake worship as a creative writer.

The story reaches no end; the author leaves the end to be decided by the readers. He says nothing about Ganga Ram, school children or the teacher. What happens to Ganga Ram after the fatal attack by the nag is also a matter for speculation.

TO CONCLUDE

The short stories by Mr. Singh portray a deep ironical view of the world around him. Khushwant Singh also dares to write on controversial topics, which other writers do not

dare to do. He presents his views in a way that makes the stories very interesting, and perhaps in this manner, he enables many readers of his stories to believe in what he believes in.

REFERENCES

1. Khushwant Singh, The voice of God and other stories, Bombay: Jaico, 1957, P.11.
 2. Ibid, P. 14.
 3. Ibid, P. 17.
 4. A Small Peg
 5. Khushwant Singh, The voice of God and Other Stories, Bombay: Jaico, 1957, P. 23.
-
-

Ritu Benjamin
tk79@rediffmail.com