



THE ELEMENT OF FANTASY IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S SELECT SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

The present paper attempts to highlight the importance of fantasy in the short stories of Khushwant Singh. The short stories selected for consideration are 'Death Comes to Daulat Ram', 'Posthumous,' 'Mark of Vishnu' and 'The Memsahib of Mandla'. In all the above stories Khushwant Singh writes about the theme of fantasy. 'The Memsahib of Mandla,' deals with a theme of fantasy and introduces the reader the story of a ghost moving around in a rest house. In the story Posthumous Singh fantasizes his own death and presents detailed events until the end of his mortal journey to the funeral ground. In the story Death comes to Daulat Ram Singh fantasizes Daulat Ram's dead father waiting at the threshold of his house. In the story Mark of Vishnu Singh fantasizes the religious fundamentalist, Gunga Ram waiting for Cobra the Kala Nag until he meets his tragic end.

INTRODUCTION

Indian English short story reached its peak in the hands of the three great writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K.Narayan and Raja Rao. The above writers employed the themes of realism, irony and spiritualism in their short stories. The legacy of the short story was continued by authors like K.A. Abbas Manohar Malgonkar and Khuswant Singh. Singh is an outstanding novelist, finest historian, a forthright political commentator, a great observer, a social critic

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and a fantastic short story writer. He concentrates on thoughts, emotions and sensations rather than with action and achievement. Singh came to be recognized as an important writer with the publication of his debut work, *The Mark of Vishnu* and other stories in 1951. In his career spanning more than five decades he has established his reputation as a great novelist and a journalist.

Short story according to Khushwant Singh can constitute fantasy. As he points out, a short story “can be as fantastic and its characters and situations as fanciful as the writer cares to make them - provided they have the ring of truth and a ‘message’ to convey” (“On the Short Story,” p.xii). This element of fantasy can be noted in Khushwant Singh’s stories like “*The Memsahib of Mandla*,” “*Posthumous*,” “*Death Comes to Daulat Ram*,” and “*The Mark of Vishnu*.”

The story, “*The Memsahib of Mandla*,” deals with a theme of fantasy and introduces the reader the story of a ghost moving around in a rest house. The whole narrative revolves round this ghost and is set in the rest house built in red brick by the late Jean Memsahib, one of the English women who came to live in India with their husbands. Mr. John Dyson, his wife, and daughter, Jennifer, come over to stay in the rest house for a holiday. Mrs. Dyson does not like the house as she sees the footprints and the ghost of a woman: “Out of the misty haze emerged a figure of a woman in a long white dressing gown. Her hair was tied in two plaits which fell on her shoulders. Her features were not discernible but her eyes had an inhuman brightness, Mrs. Dyson turned cold, petrified with fear. She tried to scream, but only a muffled moan escaped her.” (“*The Memsahib of Mandla*,” pp. 62-63). The appearing of the ghost in white clothes, its footprints ending at the grave and its walking towards the bed room of the English couple, as a whole, show the story as fanciful and fantastic.

Here Singh employs curiosity and suspense as the chief techniques to attract and impress the reader. At the same time, he gives it a ring of truth when he makes Mr. Dyson a tragic victim of his own disbelieving nature. Mr. Dyson knowing of the ghost wishes to solve its problem for ever; “...I am going to stay right here and settle this ghost once for all” (“*The Memsahib of Mandla*,” p .64) But in the midnight he dozes off. When he listens to the howling of the jackals and the thundering in the sky he wakes up and finds the ghost of a woman standing outside his net. He shoots in order to kill the ghost, but to the surprise of the reader instead of shooting the ghost he shoots himself, giving a tragic finale to the story: “There were two loud reports. Dyson fell with the full discharge of the gun in his face” (“*The Memsahib of Mandla*,” p.65)

In another story, “*Posthumous*,” the author fancies his own death and records the response of his friends, relatives and acquaintances to his demise. Singh lets us know that he had



imagined his death would be mentioned on the front page of the “Tribune” with a small photograph. The head line would read ‘Sardar Khushwant Singh Dead’” (“Posthumous,” p.1). He had also fancied that the whole province and a number of Ministers including the Prime Minister, other dignitaries and his friends would mourn his death. He had also imagined the Chief Justice giving a statement to the press, “I felt that the Punjab is poorer by the passing away of this man. The cruel hand of death has cut short the promise of a brilliant career” (“Posthumous,” p.1)

But the author is disillusioned by the bitter reality of what actually transpires after his death. Watching the “posthumous” events like a silent ghost, he finds that his death is lost somewhere in the mid-folds of “The Tribune” – “at the bottom of page 3, column 1.” (“Posthumous,” p.1) His best friends, the Quadirs and the Khoslas, feel that their duty comes first and so do not turn up at the funeral. The author expresses his grief at this; “I began to feel a little small. Lesser men than myself had larger crowds, Even a dead pauper carried on municipal wheelbarrow got two sweepers to cart him off. I had only one human being, the driver, and even he seemed to be oblivious of the enormity of the soul whose decayed mansion he was transporting on its last voyage.” (“Posthumous,” p.6)

This story carries the reader to the world of fantasy. What catches the reader’s attention here, is the interesting juxtaposition of the fanciful pride of the author and the bitter reality that he has to face ‘posthumously,’ placed as it is in the background of the entire fantastic nature of the piece. It is thus that “fiction” claims a stronger truth, however strange, than the “truest” reality.

In the short story “Death Comes to Daulat Ram,” Ranga is the central character and narrator. This story uses supernatural element or fantasy. Ranga has the habit of visiting restaurants and he wishes that anything that happens at home should be informed to him over the phone. On one particular day he is informed about the serious or critical condition of his father. He goes home and later finds an old beggar standing in front of his house:

The old man just shook his head without taking his eyes off Ranga. Ranga felt as if he had been fixed in a picture frame. The man was obviously a beggar. The town was full of them after partition of the Punjab. He must be one of the millions of refugees without a home. He might have lost his relations in a massacre and was too old to begin life again. That was not all. Ranga got a feeling that he had seen the man before. (“Death Comes to Daulat Ram,” p. 80)



Later while taking lunch he looks up and stares at the portrait of his grandfather which was hung on the wall for almost twenty years. But when he looks at the portrait he remembers in a twinkling of an eye the old beggar he had seen just before sometime. Ranga goes through the whole house shouting and screaming about the beggar. He goes out of the house to find the beggar but he fails in his attempts. Thus, at the death of Ranga's father the reader can see the arrival of his grandfather's soul in order to take him into the heaven. The story ends with the following lines: "Ranga noticed that Daulat Ram was not breathing. He ran out of the room sobbing. The beggar. He's gone." ("Death Comes to Daulat Ram," p. 79)

In another famous story, Mark of Vishnu, fantasy has been employed as a technique to introduce the protagonist Gunga Ram to the reader and his devotion towards the creator the Lord Vishnu is explained:

This is for Kala Nag', said Gunga Ram, pouring the milk into saucer. 'Every night I leave it outside the hole near the wall and it's gone by the morning. ('The Mark of Vishnu,' p.13)

This section also shows the narrator and his brothers teasing Gunga Ram and his peculiar attitude towards the snake the Kala Nag. In the middle of the story the narrator and his brothers see the Kala Nag in the ground on a rainy day. They beat the snake and take it to their school. In the final part of the story the teacher in their school while teaching his zoology lesson, loosens the cord of the tin resulting in the sudden emergence of the snake from out of the box. It jumps out and rushes towards the door. At the door Gunga Ram stands with a saucer full of milk and prostrates before the Kala Nag for the mistake committed by the kids. But the snake, fearful and angry hisses, spits and bites Ganga Ram all over his head. Within minutes Gunga Ram turns pale and starts frothing at his mouth; "On his forehead were little drops of blood. These, the teacher wiped with his handkerchief. Underneath was the V mark where the Kala Nag had dug his fangs." ("The Mark of Vishnu," p.16) For all the devout worship of Vishnu detailed in the story right from the beginning, Ganga Ram becomes a victim of his own beliefs. Yet the dramatic end also suggests that perhaps Ganga Ram, after all, did get what he always wanted – moksha from this world and union of his soul with Vishnu symbolized by the mark left on Ganga Ram's head by the snake's bite.

Thus through the above discussion we can come to the conclusion that there is an element of fantasy in the short stories of Khushwant Singh. This element of fantasy can be celebrated in Khushwant Singh's stories like "The Memsahib of Mandla," "Posthumous," "Death Comes to Daulat Ram," and "The Mark of Vishnu." Singh marvelously presents fantasy through the techniques of suspense, fear and curiosity.



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