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Cultural Hybridity in the Writings of Khushwant Singh

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Abstract: Khushwant Singh is regarded as one of the most distinguished writers in contemporary Indian English fiction. His work serves as a testament to cultural hybridity, rooted deeply in the Punjabi soil and the Sikh religion, yet simultaneously shaped by a Western education and a modern, cosmopolitan worldview. Singh's literature explores the multifaceted cultural landscape of India, particularly highlighting the tension between tradition and modernity, exemplified by the changing social norms and values witnessed during his lifetime. His novels and stories dissect religious hybridity through historical narratives, such as the birth of Sikhism from a "wedlock" between Islam and Hinduism, contrasting this synthesis with the catastrophic communal conflicts of the Partition era. Furthermore, Singh embodies stylistic hybridity, blending the roles of novelist, historian, and journalist, employing caustic wit and satire to critique both Anglicized snobbery and bureaucratic blunders alongside candid discussions of sexuality and human relationships. This synthesis of cultural allegiance and critical detachment establishes him as a fearless intellectual whose narrative legacy explores the complexities and contradictions of the Indian psyche.

Keywords: *Sikh Ethos, Punjabi Culture, Western Education, Communalism, Satire, Identity, Partition, Grotesque.*

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Introduction

Khushwant Singh stands as a significant figure in Contemporary Indian-English Fiction, whose literary achievements span the roles of novelist, story writer, historian, and distinguished journalist. Born in Hadali, Punjab (now in Pakistan), in 1915, his life stretched across nearly a century, witnessing and chronicling India's tumultuous transformation from a British colony to a modern nation. This period of immense socio-political change formed the crucial context for his exploration of cultural hybridity—the complex and often contradictory intermingling of native Indian heritage with foreign, colonial, and modern influences.

Singh's own biography is a manifestation of this hybridity. He belonged to an affluent Sikh family and was educated initially at Government College, Lahore, before pursuing law at King's College London and the Inner Temple. This educational background instilled a sophisticated command of English, which he utilized effectively to articulate the nuances of Indian sensibility. Although he claimed to be an agnostic, Singh demonstrated a healthy attachment to Sikhism in his fictional world, attaching significance to his faith and community. His fictional cosmos is deeply rooted in the Punjabi soil and the Sikh religion, reflecting a genuine passion and concern for his community. He translated Sikh religious texts, such as the Japji Sahib and Hymns of Guru Nanak, showcasing his intimate knowledge and scholarly engagement with his heritage.

However, Singh's work consistently explores the resulting tensions when this deeply traditional culture meets the influence of the West and modernity. He observed the remnants of colonial influence in post-independence India and satirized those who embraced Anglicized snobbery, such as Mohan Lal in *Karma*, who was proud of his perfect English accent and Oxford background. His time spent serving in the Indian Foreign Service in Canada, the UK, and at UNESCO in Paris further broadened his cross-cultural perspective.

The most profound expression of cultural hybridity in crisis is found in his partition narratives. Singh witnessed the bloodshed of 1947 firsthand, an event that became the catalyst for his writing debut and informed his seminal work, *Train to Pakistan*. The novel vividly captures the disintegration of the peaceful communal hybridity that once characterized India, transforming villages like Mano Majra from sites of diverse coexistence into battlefields of conflicting loyalties.

Singh's writing style itself is hybrid, blending journalism, history, and fiction. He employs sharp wit, humor, and satirical expressions—a stylistic complex used to dissect social hypocrisy, political corruption, and sexual taboos. This fearless and candid approach, blending cultural celebration with unflinching critique, defines Khushwant Singh's unique contribution to Indian literature.

Mapping Cultural Hybridity

Khushwant Singh's literary output consistently navigates the blending, clashing, and negotiation of various cultural elements, forming a powerful discourse on Indian identity in a rapidly changing world.

Hybridity of Heritage: Sikh Ethos and Cosmopolitan Intellect

Khushwant Singh's personal identity established a fundamental hybridity: a profound attachment to Sikh and Punjabi culture filtered through a rigorous Western educational lens.

The Punjabi and Sikh Cosmos Singh's literary and fictional art is undeniably rooted in the Punjabi soil and Sikh religion. His novels seek an artistic exploration of various facets of the Sikh way of life, widening the awareness of the Sikhs as a distinct entity. Sikhism itself is historically presented as a synthesis, having had its "birth out of a wedlock between Islam and Hinduism".

In both *A Train to Pakistan* (1956) and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959), Khushwant Singh explores the religiosities, histories, and social status of the Sikhs, demonstrating the author's Sikh consciousness. Characters often embody this Sikh ethos, reflecting both its positive ideals and negative traits.

The positive image of Sikhism is embodied by Juggat Singh in *Train to Pakistan*, whose sacrifice for his Muslim lover, Nooran, proves him worthy of the Guru's edicts against caste and creed. His final action implies the heroic motive that the "noblest end for a Sikh was to die for his state". Sabhrai in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* is a "fictional realization of the glorious Sikh ideals". She maintains her moral faith, advising her son, Sher Singh, that betraying his friends would mean he would "no longer to be regarded as a Sikh". Her character illustrates the Sikh mystic principle of "detachment in attachment".

Conversely, Singh portrays the negative, militant traits of Sikhism through characters like Sher Singh, who adopts violence, declaring: "We are Sikhs who do not fear any enemies. We shall destroy all those who stand in our way".

Singh utilized his historical scholarship, including *A History of the Sikhs*, to present a definitive survey of this community, showcasing their traditions, customs, and language, thereby promoting Punjabi culture within the larger Indian literary landscape.

Hybridity in Societal Critique (East Meets West) Having been educated in London, Singh possessed an East-West perspective that enabled his incisive critique of Indian society. This critique often targeted the adoption of Western manners without substance, demonstrating a colonial cultural hangover. In the story *Karma*, the protagonist Mohan Lal, an Anglicized snob proud of his Oxford background and perfect English accent, travels first-class while his "genuine Indian Woman" wife travels separately. His humiliation at the hands of English soldiers satirizes the delusion of those who reject their native roots for colonial pretense. Singh's time in diplomatic and journalistic roles, including as Information Officer in Canada and Press Attaché in London, gave him a broad view of international politics and culture, which he contrasted with the stagnation of Indian bureaucracy and politics.

Hybridity of Communalism: Harmony, Rupture, and Mockery

Singh's writing is arguably most famous for documenting the catastrophic rupture of India's long-standing, often fragile,

communal hybridity during the Partition. However, he also satirizes the blind faith and hypocrisy that often fuel communal conflicts.

The Hybridity of Partition Train to Pakistan portrays Mano Majra, a village symbolizing India's multicultural fabric where different communities coexisted peacefully before 1947. The village had Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh residents, sharing a large peepul tree. This fragile social structure collapses violently when a train full of dead Sikhs arrives, turning the village into a "battlefield of conflicting loyalties". The suffering of the common people due to the wrong decisions of politicians is a core element of this critique. Singh contrasts the mass hatred and violence with the ultimate humanism found in the love and self-sacrifice of Juggat Singh for Nooran, suggesting that love is the "only resisting human power against all inhuman evil forces".

In *Delhi: A Novel*, the hybridity of the city's history is chronicled, stretching from the Mughal period to the trauma of the 1984 Hindu-Sikh riots following Indira Gandhi's assassination. The novel highlights the arrogance of Islamic leaders and the deep-seated anti-Hindu feeling that prevailed since the first Muslim invaders. Yet, the novel also shows a non-communal attitude in the hijra Bhagmati, who protects the Sikh narrator, emphasizing a complex, nuanced hybridity within the social fabric.

Mocking Religious Syncretism and Conflict Khushwant Singh, the self-proclaimed agnostic, used satire to critique organized religion and its blind followers. He frequently exposed how religion was exploited by successive rulers and politicians to "foster divisive tendencies" and secure power, urging people not to be used as "hapless pawns".

In the short story "The Great Difference," Singh mocks two religious representatives, Haji Hafiz Maulana (Muslim) and Swami Vashesvra Nanda (Hindu), traveling to a World Congress for Faith in Paris. Their mutual hostility and preoccupation with each other's living habits—the Swamiji warns the Sikh narrator not to eat with Muslims, calling them "outcasts and dirty people"; the Maulana criticizes the Swamiji's hygiene and mildly attacks Sikhism—reflect the "hidden ugliness, hostility, barbaric intuitions, partiality, and mercilessness of fellow humans in Indian society on a communal basis". These characters are symbols of caricature and hypocrisy, more interested in blaming each other than cleaning up the "filth in their minds". The setting is further complicated by the appearance of Mlle. Jeanne Dupont in Paris, a "creature of the flesh" whose physical appearance distracts the religious delegates from their sacred purpose, thus hybridizing the spiritual journey with raw lust.

Hybridity of Morality: Tradition, Sexuality, and Modernity

Singh fearlessly addressed taboo subjects, particularly sexuality and gender dynamics, in a way that challenged traditional Indian norms and explored the shifting morality of modern, urban society. This exploration of sexuality represents a cultural hybridity where traditional constraints meet modern, often Westernized, desires. Lust vs. Love in Modern India Singh openly discussed sex, which critics sometimes deemed an obsession, but he used it as a means to expose characters' true nature and critique social hypocrisy.

In *In The Company of Women* (1999), the protagonist Mohan Kumar, returning to India after completing his education in the States, divorces his wife and embarks on a journey of sexual

gratification, interested only in lust, much like his "American counterparts". This novel critiques the hypocritical attitude in India where matrimonial columns prioritize "caste, fair skin, money and whether the bride is a virgin," despite public discussions of "true love". The book's unflinching portrayal of Mohan Kumar's "elemental and carnal passions" is an uninhibited and erotic account of his sexual life.

The mingling of the "spiritual and the sensual" is also seen in earlier novels, clarifying the "down-to-earth aspects of Sikhism".

Psychological and Grotesque Hybridity In his short stories, Singh frequently used grotesque elements to reveal suppressed psychological urges and the awakening of sexuality in non-traditional characters. The grotesque, characterized by duality and hybridity, is employed for satire and criticism.

The story Kusum explores suppressed psychological urges through Kusum Kumari, a young Indian girl who initially dislikes cosmetics, believes a woman's place is in the kitchen, and appears "dull, overweight, and dated". She represents traditional constraints and suppressed femininity. Her transformation is triggered by an interaction with an orange hawker, a "flawed and grotesque character". He makes lewd remarks, saying: "No, Miss Sahib, I am not blind, but I am one-eyed. He shut one of his eyes in a long, lecherous wink and made the sound of a loud kiss". Ironically, this vulgar gesture acts as an "enormous push," causing Kusum to realize her beauty in the mirror and start using makeup. This scenario projects the hidden subjects in the human psyche, such as adultery, lust, and sexuality.

Stylistic Hybridity: Journalism, History, and Candidness

Singh's literary identity is inherently hybridized by his profession: he successfully merged the roles of novelist, distinguished journalist, historian, and editor, giving his writing a distinctive, immediate, and multifaceted voice.

Blending Genres

Singh authored major historical works like *A History of the Sikhs*, but his fictional works also rely on historical frameworks, such as *Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, where political disturbances provide the theme. *Delhi: A Novel* is explicitly a blend of history, romance, and sex, narrating the city's saga over six hundred years. His journalistic career, marked by editing prestigious publications like *The Illustrated Weekly of India* (which saw circulation surge from 65,000 to 400,000 under his direction) and *The Hindustan Times*, ensured his writing remained topical and accessible. The *Candid, Satirical Voice* Singh's style is characterized by its simplicity, directness, and engaging narrative, allowing complex social issues to be easily grasped by a diverse readership. His columns, such as "With Malice Towards One and All," were famous for their wit and wisdom. His use of satire is a hybrid technique, employing humor to tackle serious social and political conflicts. He mocked the stagnation and inefficiency of bureaucracy, exemplified in *Man, How the Government of India Run!*, where the clerk Sundar Singh feigns exhaustion and ironically wonders how the government would run without him. His critique extended to politics, satirizing the "faulty election procedure in democratic India" (*The Voice of God*) and exposing the hypocrisy and corruption prevalent in the political landscape.

Autobiographical Hybridity Singh consistently injected autobiographical elements, personal anecdotes, and reflections into

his fiction and non-fiction, notably in *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Truth, Love & a Little Malice*, and *Khushwantnama: The Lessons of My Life*. He was "not afraid to speak his personal views and the details of his life," revealing the innate honesty of the writer, who was equally comfortable writing about the squalid and the wonderful aspects of his life. His self-written epitaph—"Here lies one who spared neither man nor God; / Waste not your tears on him, he was a sod..."—captures this fearless, self-deprecating blend of candor and cynicism.

Cross-Cultural Relationships and the Universal Human Condition

Singh's themes often transcend singular cultural boundaries, exploring human relationships in universally relatable terms. His works examine cross-cultural relationships, highlighting the challenges and beauty of connections formed across cultural divides.

In *Train to Pakistan*, the love between Jugga (Sikh) and Nooran (Muslim) provides a humanistic core that attempts to resist the political and religious hatred, suggesting that man-woman love relationship has greater power than evil forces. Similarly, in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, Mrs. Taylor (British) and Sabhrai (Sikh) transcend traditional and religious beliefs, emphasizing that the essence of humanism is in 'love' not in hate. Singh's exploration of love, fear, longing, and joy resonated deeply with readers, enriching the understanding of human emotions regardless of cultural background.

Conclusion

Khushwant Singh's literary output is a masterful study in cultural hybridity, reflecting the multiple worlds he inhabited and chronicled. His enduring significance lies in his ability to harmonize deeply felt loyalty to his Punjabi and Sikh heritage with the analytical, secular skepticism acquired through his Western education and intellectual pursuits. This hybrid perspective allowed him to celebrate India's multicultural fabric while critically exposing the hypocrisy, corruption, and communal fractures that plagued it.

Through his stylistic blend of journalism, history, and fiction, characterized by unflinching candor and a defining use of wit and satire, Singh shattered literary taboos, particularly concerning sexuality, making complex cultural dynamics accessible to a wide audience. By presenting multidimensional characters caught between tradition and modernity, conflict and compassion, Singh created narratives that resonate with the universal human condition. His legacy is that of a literary titan who taught India to confront its contradictions with honesty, humor, and a persistent humanistic vision.

Cultural hybridity in Khushwant Singh's writing acts like a double-edged sword: one side fiercely preserves the rich traditions and deep-rooted history of his native land, while the other relentlessly cuts away the deceit and dogma accumulated from foreign influence and internal hypocrisy.

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