

## Narrative Technique in Khushwant Singh's Novels

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Narrative is a telling of some true or fictitious event or connected sequence of events, recounted by a narrator to a narratee (although there may be more than one of each). Narratives are to be distinguished from descriptions of qualities, states, or situations, and also from dramatic enactments of events (although a dramatic work may also include narrative speeches). A narrative will consist of a set of events (the story) recounted in a process of narration (or discourse), in which the events are selected and arranged in a particular order (the plot). The category of narratives includes both the shortest accounts of events (e.g. the cat sat on the mat, or a brief news item) and the longest historical or biographical works, diaries, travelogues, etc., as well as novels, ballads, epics, short stories, and other fictional forms. In the study of fiction, it is usual to divide novels and shorter stories into first person narratives and third person narratives.

As an adjective, 'narrative' means 'characterized by or relating to story telling'. Thus narrative technique is the method of telling stories, and narrative poetry is the class of poems (including ballads, epics, and verse romances) that tell stories, as distinct from dramatic and lyric poetry<sup>1</sup>

Literally speaking, Narrative is a story and it can be conveyed through pictures, songs, poetry, speech, fiction and non-fiction as well. When in the writing mode, its telling is relegated to a special person; it becomes a technique used

by that person. This person who is consigned the duty of narration is the narrator and his perspective serves as a prism through which ideas are transmitted to the readers. Narrative technique is vastly an aesthetic enterprise. It is binding vine of the narrative. A narrator detains the past, holds present and prepares the reader for future. There has been much exaggeration in the narrative techniques since 1938 when Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* was published. It was perhaps the first most successful and influential novel by an Indian writer in English. Traditionally, narrative techniques are explained through point of view in novel. There are three points of view to present a narrative: first person point of view when the narrator is one of the characters: he participates in the action and also comments on the events, third person point of view when the narrator narrates the story in an objective manner and omniscient point of view where the narrator is God like and can also make his presence felt with authorial intrusions.

A narrator has plethora of options to narrate events. He can base his narrative on temporality and causality or he can narrate through focalization. Focalization changes the course of narrative as the reader receives images of character through the impression of the narrator. Focalization employs three dimensional strategies: the voice of one who narrates, one who sees and his understanding of events.

Train to Pakistan has a fine blending of growth in space and movement in time. The novel grows out of a chronological sequence of time with a synthesis of reality and value. It expresses creatively as to how the movement of trains, which used to set tone of the village, signalling time for action, rest and sleep, became a symbol of despair, darkness and destruction. This technique of contrast is very suggestive.

The novelist has recreated imaginatively the likes of Hukum Chand, the commissioner, reformist, Iqbal, criminals Juggat Singh and Mali gang, still visible in the Indian society. In moneylender Ram Lal's murder case Jugga and Iqbal are put behind the bars, while the real culprit Mali is released after arrest. Is such a drama not enacted even today? Also, the lodging together of Jugga, the criminal, and Iqbal, the reformist, gives a peep into the police way of functioning then and even today.

In his realistic depiction of the then prevailing atmosphere of hatred and violence and distrust between the Hindus and the Muslims, Khushwant Singh narrative spares neither:

Mullahs roamed the Punjab and the Frontier Province with boxes of human skulls said to be those of Muslims in Bihar.<sup>2</sup>

There were reports of Pakistani police helping and protecting Muslims who were attacking and killing Hindus. The atrocities inflicted on Hindus in Lahore have been described by the novelist through a police constable who reports:

...It was the Muslim police taking side which made the difference in the riots. Hindu boys of Lahore would have given the Muslims a hell if it had not been for their police. They did a lot of ZULUM... their army is like that, too, Baluch soldiers have been shooting people whenever they were sure there was

no chance of running into Sikh or Gurkha troops.<sup>3</sup>

The novelist had maintained a balance in condemning atrocities on both sides. As a realist in his factual depiction of the violence scenes, he narrates the story of four Sikh Sardars on a killing spree in a jeep alongside the column of mile-long Muslim refugees on foot. "...without warning they opened fire with their stenguns, God alone knows how many they killed..."<sup>4</sup>

Khushwant Singh has beautifully portrayed the man's multidimensional mind, especially in the case of Jugga, the criminal, in love with Nooran, the Muslim Mullah's daughter. Jugga visits the Gurudwara and asks for the Guru's blessings to prepare himself for the final sacrifice which he does make. This is also true in the case of Hukum Chand whose mind flies to Haseena, the dancing girl, heading for Pakistan with a hope that she would be safe. This ambivalence of mind has exquisitely been brought out by Singh in the novel. Shahane comments on the character of Juggat Singh and says:

One finds a "rare combination of the criminal and the lover, which is a baffling aspect of the realities and complexities of life. He embodies the ambivalence of moral values."<sup>6</sup>

In a rare narrative technique, the novelist has depicted forces of division and unity, hate and love, anger and affection and revenge and sacrifice alternating in the novel. Shahane commenting on this aspect says:

Train to Pakistan presents rural Punjab with its religious and caste divisions, which result in alienation, alternating with forces of union, which result in amity. Hate alternates with love; anger alternates with affection;

the desire for revenge alternates with the impulse to sacrifice.<sup>7</sup>

Singh in this novel has also artistically explored the mind of the Sikh priest Meet Singh and the reformist Iqbal, who discuss the urgent need for stopping the communities on the Indian side from taking retaliatory actions by blowing the train heading for Pakistan with Muslim refugees from Mano Majra on the railway over bridge mid river. Meet Singh is helpless and so is the reformist Iqbal as the voice of sanity had been stilled and drowned in the communal frenzy, provoked and ignited by arrival and disposal of trainloads of the slain bodies from across the borders. Both Meet Singh and Iqbal in the given situation find themselves incapable of any positive action and both find themselves out of place.

But it is not the same case with criminal Jugga who gets reformed at the last moment and plays the role of saviour, climbs up the steel span of the bridge, tugs at the rope, stretches himself on it near the point of knot, slashes at the rope with small KIRPAN in face of a volley of shots fired at him by the communalists intent on derailing the train. But Jugga undeterred hammers on and finally cuts the rope in shreds, delinks it with the explosive and the train passes off the bridge safely to Pakistan.

Shahane hails this novel as a creative endeavour of Khushwant Singh: He says:

The art of Khushwant Singh is revealed in not merely probing deep into the real but in transporting the actual into symbol and image. His art of realistic portrayal cannot be described merely as an exercise in the book-keeping of existence: in fact, it is a creative endeavour of transcending the actual, asserting the value of dignity of the

individual, and finally, of expressing the tragic splendour of a man's sacrifice for a woman.<sup>8</sup>

Truly, Jugga makes his sacrifice for his love, Nooran, who along with

others of her caste was heading for Pakistan by the train which is saved from being derailed. Thus, his personal physical love for Nooran is transformed into the love for the entire trainload of Muslims. His love Nooran transcends his physical love for her.

Mahatma Gandhi used to say that 'hate the sin, not the sinner.' In the same vein, the novelist tells his readers through the reformist Iqbal: "Criminals are not born. They are made by hunger, want and injustice."<sup>9</sup>

Khushwant Singh uses the narrative technique of contrast which is his speciality in this novel. Taking a note of this striking feature applied by the novelist in Train to Pakistan; Shahane says :

The three scenes taking almost simultaneously to the refrain of the railway engine's whistle demonstrate the three-fold mode of operation of the principle of contrast inherent in Singh's art of fiction. Dacoity is contrasted with love, and a spiritual love is differentiated from sheer physical passion. The act of decoity is conceived in a world of growing materialism...Jugga's genuine involvement with Nooran is based on strong emotion, whereas-Hukum-Chand's association with Haseena, though delicate and ambivalent, is initially a transitory, superficial and casual relationship.<sup>10</sup>

Singh's narrative technique is such that in his portrayal he has not only

created the real and life-like situations in the novel, but has also given a sense of largeness to life. He has a unique skill and ability to weave multi-dimensional thoughts into a perfect synthetic whole on a pattern seldom found anywhere else. He has a power to depict situations with down-to-earth worldliness.

Singh has a knack for painting the insignificant into significant, giving adequate word visuals for gestures, facial expressions and nuances of behaviour making the depiction vivid and effective as in case of the singer and the dancing party brought to the guest house to entertain Hukum Chand. The description is typically Indian and suited to the situation.

Khushwant Singh has presented Mano Majra on the Indo-Pak border in the Punjab as a microcosm of the communal temper during the days of partition. Applying a rare narrative technique, Singh sets the pattern of the village fusing its atmosphere with the whistling and puffing of the rail engines, regulating the village activities with the arrival and departure of trains. When the first stories of atrocities reach, the peace of the village is disturbed, but for the unsuspecting Mano Majra inhabitants the stories relate to a different world. They ignore the stories and prefer to live in the world of their own, sharing joys and sorrows of each other and discussing the village problems in the Gurudwara. There is a vivid description in the novel of the village harmonious atmosphere and the functional integration. Shahane rightly observes :

...train is a dual symbol. It symbolizes life and action, but it also stands for death and disaster. The scene of the train from Pakistan, which brings in countless corpses to Mano Majra, is awful and heartrending.

The setting and appearance of the train are in tune with its funeral atmosphere.<sup>11</sup>

Reflecting on the unceremonious burial of bodies from Pakistan and consigning the same to flames which rise to the sky, described by Singh as “red tongues of flame”, Shahane says:

The “red tongues of flame” has dual meaning. It symbolises poisonous and aggressive nature of the snake and shows how, in the heat of destructive lunacy men turn into poisonous reptiles.<sup>12</sup>

The dramatization in the narrative technique of Khushwant Singh has found full play in his description of Jugga determined to cut the rope linked to explosives to blow off the train from Mano Majra heading for Pakistan as it crossed the railway bridge over the nearby river. As the reader goes through line by line his excitement increases as he gets a visual of the dare-devil performance of Jugga. He says :

The man hacked the rope vigorously. The thick rope had been tied horizontally above the railway line on the first steel pan of the bridge. It was about 20 feet above the track. The rope was stiff as the shaft of steel. The vigilant leader of the gang communalists who wanted to derail the train of Muslim refugees mid river raised his rifle to his shoulder and fired. He hit his mark and one of the man’s legs came off the rope and dangled in the air. The other was still twined round the rope. He slashed away in frantic haste. The engine was only a few yards off, throwing embers high up in the sky. Somebody fired another shot. The man’s body slid off the rope, but he clung to it with his hands and chin. He pulled himself up, caught the rope under his left armpit and again started hacking with his

right hand. The rope had been cut in shreds. Only a thin tough strand remained. He went at it with his knife, and then with his teeth. The man shivered and collapsed. The rope snapped in the centre as he fell. The train went over him, and went on to Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

Critics K.K. Sharma and B.K. Johri in their book, *The Partition in Indian-English Novels*, commenting on *Train to Pakistan* echo the view of V.A. Shahane about realism in the novel. They say:

Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* pictures the brutal, realistic story of political hatred and of mass passions during the tragic days that preceded and followed the partition of India...

Trains were halted and the unfortunate passengers were ruthlessly butchered. Men, women and children were indiscriminate victims of mad communal frenzy: they were molested and killed by armed bands of men. The novel depicts the fateful journey of one such train vividly and powerfully.<sup>14</sup>

The narrative in the novel opens with a suggestive reference to the summer season of 1947 which the novelist describes as "longer, drier and dustier".<sup>15</sup> These expressions foretell the future happenings. The word 'longer' suggests continued oppressive heat and increased miseries of the uprooted people on either side of the Indo-Pak border. The word 'drier' suggests that the fountain of friendship, fellow- feeling and compassion would dry up, and the word 'dustier' suggests feverish movements of the uprooted people in search of new hearth and home kicking up blinding dust.

In his narrative technique Singh has narrated the story in cause and effect, in action and responses, in tensions and conflicts. He has

converted a historical fact of partition into a gripping plot giving it a comic-tragic effect. He has recreated the past into meaningful symbols of contemporary situation and future possibilities.

In this regard, A.N. Dwivedi, commenting on the two novels, *Train to Pakistan* and *I shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, says:

His two novels, *Train to Pakistan* and *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, depict the tragic circumstances leading to India's partition in 1947. There is a thick layer of disenchantment and disillusionment and bewilderment in them, the vision remains realistic throughout, and the communal barbarism is depicted with a great deal of irony and satire. The style is tough and terse, concise and spare, in both the novels, and it is likely that Singh is influenced by Hemingway in this matter.<sup>17</sup>

*Train to Pakistan* follows a repetitive pattern marked by phases of sanity and insanity, discrimination and patronage, corrupt practices and the value thinking and righteousness and responsibility. There is lying, bribery, hypocrisy, drunkenness, womanizing, unfair police and bureaucratic functioning.

In his narration of the story Singh has not lost sight of popular beliefs of the people about bad weather, disturbances in the weather cycle, symbolic use of birds and lizards to make a point which has suggestively been explained.

Khushwant Singh's narrative seems to be realistic giving a factual account of each encounter with all possible details. It seems that he revels in the very act of description. An artist's ability to recreate essential reality that lies beyond the solid seeming wall of reality endows his work with multiple meanings.

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