

# *An Interview* *with Khushwant Singh*

MALASHRI LAL and VIJAY K. SHARMA

**K**HUSHWANT SINGH (b. 1915) is a well-known fiction writer, Sikh historian, and journalist. His reputation as a writer rests on the Partition novel, *Train to Pakistan* (first published in 1956 as *Mano Majra*, named after the novel's fictional border town near the North West frontier), a harrowing narrative of events resulting in ruthless mass destruction marking the division of India in the autumn of 1947. In the words of Warren French, "Singh's terse fable suggests a profound disillusionment with the power of law, reason, and intellect in the face of elemental human passions. . . . Singh is a brilliant, sardonic observer of a world undergoing convulsive changes; and his novels provide a unique insight into one of the major political catastrophies of this century." His novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959) is about British abetted terrorism in pre-Independence days; according to French, it "takes a much dimmer view of human capacity for compassion and self-sacrifice than *Train to Pakistan*" (820). In many of his short stories, Singh exposes so-called religious and superstitious beliefs, expressing disillusionment about man's rationality.

Trained as a lawyer in England, Singh worked as Press Attaché in Indian Foreign Services in Ottawa and London, taught at Oxford, Princeton, and various other universities. He has been a journalist of long standing and repute, writing columns for a number of national and international publications. He is also a well-known translator.

What follows are extracts from a wide-ranging interview, which took place at Singh's home on a pleasant afternoon, 5 October 1997.

LAL: *How did you start writing?*

Interestingly, I started my career as a writer in Canada in 1947-48, when I was posted in Ottawa, in the Indian High Commission. My first story was "Portrait of a Lady," which was published in *Canadian Forum*. Then I wrote for *Saturday Post* (Toronto) and then published some stories in the American Magazine *Harper's*.

LAL: *In a recent article, you said that during Partition you "lost faith not only in humanity but also . . . in religion" and that you have been "an agnostic ever since" [5]. How is this reflected in your literary works?*

I continued to write stories that are anti-belief and that mock superstition. I have a story called "Agnostic," and my much anthologized story "The Mark of Vishnu" is rather well-known since it appears in a number of school textbooks.

SHARMA: *Yes, you are known for that kind of stance, but whenever the subject of Operation Blue Star<sup>1</sup> is discussed, you seem to express strong sentiments against it and tend to favour the Sikh religion.*

That's not quite true. Operation Blue Star has now been acknowledged as a blunder. I had made several statements about the Punjab situation to Mrs. Indira Gandhi and also in Parliament. I told Mrs. Gandhi: "You don't know my community. It is like a nest of hornets." She said that there was no intention to send in the army but then she did. I am not a believer, but I have a sense of belonging and am concerned about what happens to my community. I do not have religious belief in God and scriptures. On this account, I have often been called a hypocrite, a person who observes symbols of Sikhism. But, despite these outward symbols, I have never compromised my position. I have written on Sikh history and translated the scriptures. The more I read about religion, the more I was convinced that I should be a non-believer.

SHARMA: *You have expressed your sentiments about India's Partition and how the trauma affected various communities. Your novel "Train to Pakistan" brings out the tragedy so effectively.*

LAL: *And now your novel has been turned into a film. What changes did this entail in terms of dramatizing the characters and replacing English with a robust Punjabi?*

I think it is a well-made film. The censors have objected to the use of Punjabi abuses, but how is it possible to convey that atmosphere without *ma behan ki gali* [abusive language involving mother and sister]. When the two Punjabi *jats* talk to one another, it comes naturally. The case is still pending in the court and the judgment is awaited. I passed the script [of the film] but had nothing to do with the casting of actors.

SHARMA: *The action in the novel evolves gradually and is very convincing, but in the film it seems rather rapid and sudden.*

Yes, I was surprised by the beginning of the film. In the novel, I had made this character Jugaa, the son of a dacoit. In the film, his father is shown being hanged. But then that is a valid change, otherwise how could they show it on the screen? However, I have two regrets about the film: more of the pastoral life was not shown and the climax did not get the attention it deserves.

SHARMA: *Were you aware of any other creative work about Partition when you wrote "Train to Pakistan"?*

I believe mine was the first Partition novel. Later there were several. Saadat Hasan Manto's story "Toba Tek Singh" got a lot of attention, but it is utterly contrived. The story is about people in a lunatic asylum being divided between India and Pakistan on the basis of their religion. It tells the story of Partition in a tragic-comic way.

SHARMA: *Some other well-known ones are, for example, "Tamas" . . .*

I saw the film *Tamas* but have not read the book. Yes there have been quite a few on this theme of Partition, much in the vernacular, which did not make the impact it deserved. For example, K. A. Abbas's "Sardarji" was not adequately translated. Initially it was misunderstood because it captured the stereotype—*Joon* [lice] in their long hair, their madness at noon—but it was a powerful story.

LAL: *What is your assessment of the literature about the Partition written by later writers, say, Mukul Kesavan, Bapsi Sidhwa, and others?*

Mukul Kesavan, I like his writing. Bapsi Sidhwa is good, but she makes a bloomer in *Ice-Candy-Man*. The novel is based in Lahore, of course. When I met Bapsi, I told her that she had mentioned only seven Sikh gurus. You see, she had misunderstood *Satguru* ["Sadguru": guru who leads one to truth] as seven gurus. So I told her: *Tum hamre teen guru kha gai* [You swallowed our three gurus].

SHARMA: *Do you think she made this mistake because she lives in North America and is not familiar with . . . ?*

No. A Pakistani had no business not to know the basics and since she lives in America she should have done her homework better. *Ice-Candy-Man* will probably be made into a film. Yes. It has wonderful visual qualities.

SHARMA: *One wonders how Partition has been viewed in Pakistan. In India, for example, the idealists never favoured it but they had to give in. In Pakistan, people were looking forward to the birth of an entirely new nation.*

On the subject of Partition, the Pakistani writer is full of compassion. Yes, it was a new nation but there was a sense of tragedy about how it took place. Most of the writing is in Urdu. There is rich Urdu poetry about Partition. And then there is Punjabi writing as in the work of Ustad Daman from Lahore.

SHARMA: *This brings us to Rushdie's recent remarks on Indian literature [that prose writing—both fiction and non-fiction—by Indian writers working "in English" is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 "official languages" of India, the so-called "vernacular languages" (x)] and the controversy generated thereafter.*

Rushdie was a little rash in making the statement, but I tend to agree with him generally. Vocabulary in all Indian languages is comparatively limited; English is a richer language and has a larger market. It is true that we have very good writers in Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Githa Hariharan, and this young woman

Arundhati Roy. It is surprising that all this good writing in English has been during the last two decades. At one time, we used to read the Latin American writers and now all the good writing is coming from this part of the world.

SHARMA: *Do you think what Rushdie said about literatures in Indian languages has something to do with the lack of availability of good translations?*

No. I have seen a lot of translations. My own analysis is that it is the poverty of vocabulary. Tagore's novels are disappointing; his poetry reads better. I have read William Radice's translations. I am not familiar with Mahashweta Devi, but Satyajit Ray's stories are more readable than Gurudev's, though it is blasphemy to say so. Regional writing is limited . . .

LAL: *Who have been the literary influences in your life and for what reasons?*

The incentive came from bad Indian writing in English. I did extensive reading of the older writers—Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh. I enjoyed the wit, irony, and malice. Then there were prose writers like [Malcolm] Muggeridge.

SHARMA: *But Huxley is not known much for fiction.*

I like his essays, but he wrote some good fiction as well. I like the handling of language by English writers rather than the Americans such as Philip Roth.

SHARMA: *A fine story of yours, "Bottom Pincher," published long time back in "London Magazine," reads like a piece of writing by an Englishman.*

I am half a Brit! I tell writers that you cannot write English unless you've made love to an English woman.

LAL: *What would you tell female writers?*

The same!

SHARMA: *Do you think a writer has any role to play in situations such as after the demolition of Babri Masjid? Can a writer help in bringing about cultural understanding among communities?*

I am concerned about the resurgence of fundamentalism—the phenomena of Bhindrawale, Hindu fundamentalism, Sangh Parivar, Muslim fundamentalism. This is a theme in my [news-paper] columns and in my other writings. I write two syndicated columns a week in [*The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi) and *The Tribune* (Chandigarh)] and they are translated and carried in different papers and magazines. . . . Sometimes when I am in a small town, a policewoman would ask me about something that I had written.

SHARMA: *It means that your views are able to reach the masses. Now that we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of India's independence, do you think there is enough to celebrate? Is it right the way we are doing it?*

As I have said in my columns, there is not much to celebrate. All this fanfare and razzmatazz is not justified. We have a long way to go and a lot of hard work to do.

#### NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Operation Blue Star is the military action ordered by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in early June 1984 to combat the Punjab terrorists hiding in the sacred shrine, the Golden Temple, in Amritsar. Khushwant Singh as well-known intellectual and nominated member of the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the Indian Parliament) was very critical of the action. He returned the decoration *Padma Bhushan* in protest.

#### WORKS CITED

- French, Warren. "Khushwant Singh." *Contemporary Novelists*. Ed. Lesley Henderson. Chicago: St. James Press, 1991: 818-20.
- Rushdie, Salman, and Elizabeth West, eds. *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing: 1947-1997*. London: Vintage, 1997.
- Singh, Khushwant. "I Thought the Nation Was Coming to an End." *Sunday Magazine* (*The Hindustan Times*). 28 Sept. 1997: 5.