

Khushwant Singh and the Art of Literary Journalism

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Abstract

Literary journalism is a style of newspaper and magazine writing that is invented as a response against objective journalism and instead gives factographic-subjective analysis. It has been called by various names like ‘**Popular Journalism**’, ‘**New Journalism**’, ‘**Narrative Journalism**’ and ‘**Creative Non-Fiction**’, until the term literary journalism was coined in 1970s by Tom Wolfe, and has developed up as an individual genre now. It chooses the technique of realistic fiction to portray daily life of the characters that are often from within the society and around us. Its very name indicates that it is a blended form of literature and journalism, journalism as we know is an objective analysis of the subject written for the sole purpose of giving information and literature is something subjective which follows creative form of narration and aims primarily at delighting people, it coalesces the best of both which provides its readers the most conspicuous and precise picture of society.

KEYWORDS-Literary Journalism, Popular Journalism, New Journalism, Narrative Journalism, Creative Non-Fiction

Literary Journalism is, in brief, a journalistic text that is similar to a novel or a short story. It is “journalism as literature” or journalism that reads like a novel, it is still journalism; though the literariness comes from the technique and not from invented event. It has been called by several names like ‘Popular Journalism’, ‘New Journalism’, ‘Narrative Journalism’ and ‘Creative Non-Fiction’. In a literary journalistic text scene building generates a reverie in the mind of the reader and it looks like a panorama from a motion picture. A scene takes place in a specific place at a particular time, it includes action and dialogue, concrete and specific details that appeal to the senses, such as the sense of sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste and it creates a sense of movement. Most literary journalists research their subject for days, weeks, and even months. Mark Kramer in his article “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists” in a comprehensive analysis observes:

The paired words “literary journalism” cancel each other’s vices and describe the sort of nonfiction in which art of style and narrative construction long associated with fiction help pierce to the quick of what’s happening – the essence of journalism...Literary journalism has established an encampment ringed by overlapping cousin-genres – travel writing, memoir, ethnographic and historical essays, some fiction and even ambiguous semifiction stemming from real events—all temping fields just beyond rickety fences. (p-21-22)

Norman Sims stresses that **immersion reporting, accuracy, symbolic representation, complicated structures, and voice** which are outward characteristics of literary journalism are mixed with the author's inner processes of creativity. It has become a major genre that has grown in both complexity and popularity during the last decade. Mark Singer says it is creative writing:

You don't know where the story is going to go, and you don't know what you're going to say. It's no different from writing fiction in that respect. You don't know what's going to come out of your typewriter when you sit down to do the piece, or how you're going to say it. There's still the pleasure of discovering what's on your mind, the way a poet or essayist or fiction writer does. (Singer 8)

Sheela Reddy a well-known journalist, who often accompanied Khushwantsingh to art shows, dance performance, to book launch ceremonies, dinners with ambassadors and ministers or his walks in Lodhi Gardens, Talkatora Gardens or Khan Market, writes about him in the introduction of *Why I Supported the Emergency*. According to her, he blurred the distinctions between the journalism and literature, gloriously prolific, with a hundred books to his name he was recognized wherever he went, and sought after by presidents and commoners alike. She further adds:

I basked in the reflected glory and came away more impressed each time by the person behind the mask of the Dirty Old Man and the clown – the depth of his reading, which he hid behind his humour, his curiosity about how other people lived, his keen observation that never missed a thing, absorbing every detail and quirk, his unshakeable courage to be himself on all occasions, and, above all, his complete lack of vanity. (xvii)

She comments on his voracious appetite for writing, “even at ninety-three he can deliver on deadlines that would probably send a reporter quarter his age to the loony bin. No matter how tight the deadline, he beats it by several hours and sometimes even days.” (xix) His reviews, overviews, essays or obituaries, whatever, it's hard to pin down the genre that Khushwant writes, which is possibly why he likes to call them ‘pieces’ – is seldom longer than one or two pages of a yellow legal pad. His writing can truly be categorized as ‘literary journalism.’ V.A.Shahane in her book *Khushwant Singh* confirms that his writings are marked by what may be termed as his special “idiolect” or the particular mode of using language:

His tendency is to “accept” the world as it is has emerged out of his varied experience of life and his positive approach to problems of existence. His career as a prominent journalist, too, has contributed to his philosophy of acceptance and affirmation. In fact, a great deal of his miscellaneous prose writing is marked by the apparently topical quality since it is the outcome of his everyday experience and journalistic career. (141)

In his essay on Mother Teresa (*Book of Unforgettable Women*), Khushwant Singh Presents a larger than life portrayal of Mother Teresa in his memoir on her. He informs that he remained with Mother Teresa for three days and saw everything she did. Before he went to do her profile, he went through her biography written by Malcom Muggeridge so that he could know about her before meeting her. His journalistic attitude which provokes him to do proper research on his subject is visible here. He explains the personality of Mother Teresa which he feels was not physically so charming,

but her humility and godly qualities make her the living legend, He makes a word-painting of the Mother:

Mother Teresa did not make an impressive figure—barely five foot tall and very slim, high cheek bones and thin lips. And a face full of wrinkles. It was a homely face without any charisma.... The nun's dress she had designed for herself would make the plainest looking woman look plainer. (39)

He minutely watched her speaking habits and observes, "She spoke with an Indian lilt in her voice. And like most convent-bred Indians ended her sentences with an interrogatory 'No?', meaning "isn't that so?" (39-40). Her speech pattern impresses Khushwant. He narrates the various incidents while he was with Mother Teresa, he says that she believed in miracles and she narrated incidents of God's miracles, 'Money has never been a problem,' she told me. 'God gives through His people.' (37). He gave a complete profile of Mother Teresa from her birth in Yugoslavia, her schooling, her coming to India and of acquiring citizenship in India and her opening of the charity hospital for the dying and the destitute, the special call she got from the Jesus. 10th of September 1946 was her "day of decision" as well as "inspiration day". This is how she put it:

I was going to Darjeeling to make my retreat. It was in that train I heard the call to give up all and follow Him to the slums and serve Him among the poorest of the poor'. She prepared herself for her mission, receiving an intensive course in nursing at Patna. In 1948 she opened her first school in the slums of Calcutta in a private house donated to her. (40)

Khushwant presented every fact about Mother Teresa without a drop of fallacy in it. The places he visited, the begging expedition he went with Mother Teresa. Khushwant presents her clear perception unperturbed by any confusion, he says, "When I asked her, 'Who has been the dominant figure in your life—Gandhi, Nehru, Albert Schweitzer?' without a pause she replied, 'Jesus Christ.' When I followed it up with a question about books that might have impressed her, her answer was equally categorical and in the singular: 'The Bible'" (41).

She was awarded PadmaShri in 1962, Magsaysay Award, Good Samaritans, Joseph Kennedy Awards and the Templeton Foundation Prize. Since then, till she got the Noble Prize for Peace, there was not a month when she was not showered with money and Awards of some kind or another. Every paisa went in the upkeep of hospitals orphanages and leprosaria that she opened in different parts of India as well as in foreign countries. He presents a factual picture of Mother Teresa and her achievements, her work which she did for the poor and hungry people and her utmost loyalty and resignation to Christ who she thought was present in every human being(42).

Khushwant Singh presents true-to-life sketch of the notorious dacoit Phoolan Devi, in the book *The Penguin Book of Indian Journeys*, edited by Dom Moreas. popularly known as 'Dasyu Sundari.' He visited the sites where Phoolan Devi used to visit, village Behmai where she massacred twenty Thakur men and wounded many others. He described the massacre which she carried out in Behmai as a scene minutely watched in a movie:

At an embankment she ordered them to be halted and lined up. 'For the last time, will you tell me where those two bastards are or do I have to kill you?' she asked pointing her sten-gun at them. The villagers again pleaded ignorance ... 'Bhosreekey, this will also teach you not to report to the police. Shoot the bloody bastards!' she ordered her men and yelled: 'JaiDurgaMata!' There was a burst of gunfire. The thirty men crumpled to the earth. Twenty were dead; others hit in their limbs or buttocks sprawled in blood-spattered dust. (324)

Khushwant gives a detailed account of the caste difference being observed in these remote villages and geographic details of these places. He illustrates further illustrates:

"Dacoity in India is as old as history. In some regions it is endemic and no sooner are some gangs liquidated than others come up. The most notorious dacoit country is a couple of hundred miles south-west of Behmai, along the ravines of the Chambal River in Madhya Pradesh" (325).

Singh incorporates the scenic-beauty references of the Behmai and the adjoining villages to show the ill effects of the menace of dacoity on the otherwise beautiful places. India is a vast country and people of different religion, castes and clans live in this country for ages but still they have not learnt to accommodate the ideologies of one another. The capitalists keep on exploiting the bourgeois which results in chaos and bloodshed. He illustrates it by giving such details:

It is wild and beautiful country: hills, ravines and forests enclosing small picturesque hamlets. By day there are peacocks and multi-coloured butterflies: by night, nightjars calling to each other across the pitch black wilderness flecked by fireflies.... The two main communities living along the river banks are Mallahs (boatmen) and Thakurs. The Thakurs are the higher caste and own most of the land. The Mallahs are amongst the lowest in the Hindu caste hierarchy, own little land and live mostly by plying boats, fishing and distilling liquor. (325)

Khushwant presents true picture of these places and the reasons behind these kinds of miss-happenings. He is a social reformist who tries to bring the social ills in front of the people. The projections of these dacoits are due to the callous attitude of authorities and their not putting so much importance to these villages. The development process in the country is slow and some of the villages in this country are so remotely developed that their existence is only seen when these types of incidents happen. The menace of class distinction, women ill treatment is so prevalent in India that it almost promotes these negative forces in the society.

In his book *Women and Men in My Life* (1995) character portrayal of 'Beggar Maid' is masterfully drawn. Through this character Khushwant not only draws the beauty which lies in the slums of the country but also the problem of such women who are sold at the hands of pimps (*barwahas*) and the inability of government and administration to save them from being sold and exploited. Beggar maid is not the only lady, who met this casualty, but there are numerous others who do not get noticed by the administration, and they are treated as non-existent in this world. Khushwant saw her couple of times and was attracted towards her and her unusually attractive personality. "I looked at the woman hungrily gulping bhelpuri. An uncommonly attractive girl, she was in her mid-twenties" (120). He presents her in a very touching manner delving deep into the psyche

of her character. She is like other women in the society and has been disapproved by the society who do not let a single woman live peacefully. Khushwant was able to see her other side when he saw her washing herself in the rain. She was behaving in a different way as she used to when she was surrounded by people in crowded places. It was probably to save herself from the cruel eyes of the pimps so as to prevent herself from being put into flesh trade. In public she used to present herself as a mad woman with filthy manners and dirty clothes. Khushwant describes her,

Fair, beautifully proportioned, uncombed hair wildly scattered about her face, a dirty white dhoti untidily draped around her body, I gazed at her for quite some time and wondered what an attractive young woman was doing alone in this vice ridden city. I fantasized about her long into the night.(120)

He presents the character of beggar maid with complete study of her personality; he also reports the places where the incidents happen. He compares her to Venus, a Greek God in a lyrical yet pathetic and poignant description:

The vision of Venus rising out of the sea in the form of a beggar maid of Bombay haunted me for the many days that I was away in Delhi. When I returned to Bombay I made it a point to go to Churchgate for my after-dinner stroll. The paanwallah and the bhelpuriwallah were there. But not the beggar. I asked the bhelpuriwallah what had happened to the girl. His eyes filled with tears and his voice choked as he replied: 'Saaleybharooayuthakelaygaye' (the bloody pimps abducted her). (122)

His portrayal of beggar maid is poetic as well as pathetic and has the quality similar to the description of "Chimney Sweepers" in the famous essay on the topic written by Charles Lamb..

Khushwant Singh's observation of the paradigm of man-woman relationships that exists among the vast majority of Indians is incredible. He comments on and contrasts between western ideology of love and Indian notion of love, which he criticizes. He opines that love in India is based on the orthodox views. In his essay "Sex in Indian life" in *The Book of Unforgettable Women* by giving an example of a well-educated, newly married Indian couple Mr. and Mrs. Sexena and their sexual exploits in the train which was witnessed by three passengers including Khushwant himself. Khushwant gives pictorial view of the act which he enjoyed and criticizes at the same time. He did not approve of their behavior as he felt it as total lack of refinement. And he negates total existence of love in their relationship:

It may be the beginning of another family, but I don't see where love comes in, ... I can understand illiterate peasants coupling like the cattle they rear but I cannot understand two educated people—a lecturer in a college and a school teacher—lacking so totally in sophistication or sense of privacy as to begin copulating in the presence of three strangers. (50-51,)

These young men and women never get the taste of love before their marriages and their curiosity to know about the opposite sex takes the shape of lust. He also brings forth the predicament of such couples who, even after their marriage have to live on the mercy of their elders especially the mother of groom, who out of strong desire to be the

grandmother sends her daughter-in-law with a tumbler of milk to her husband, and who, in response grabs the opportunity and gets the occasional satisfaction.

“Wife-Bashing, Indian Style” (*Big Book of Malice*) is a satire on the Indian society, in which he highlights the plight of those women who are beaten up by their husbands constantly sometimes inside their house and sometimes in front of public. In this article Khushwant narrates an incident of a husband beating his wife in public. He narrates, “A man was beating woman with a stick calling her a *randi* (whore) and *kaamchor* (shirker) among other things. The woman was screaming ‘*Hai! hai! bachao!*’ (save me)” (77). The public was witnessing all this happening like a *tamasha* and no one came forward to save her from the brutal thrashing of her husband, when the narrator happen to reach where the woman was being beaten, he intervened and tried to stop him from doing so and calling him “‘*Besharam! Auratpehaathuthathahai!*” (77) but undeterred man and the people around who were also witnessing the same episode looked at him with surprise. The man said “‘*Mereaurathai; tumharakyalenadenahai?*” (77) and the people around who were witnessing the incident called Khushwant to keep out of it as it was their household quarrel, Khushwant brings the ills of the society which reduces the position of women to just an object of sex and producing children. It is considered a bad thing if wife goes to police to report the incidents like this. It clearly shows the mentality of the Indian people who held woman responsible for anything wrong happened in the family, he elaborates his point thus:

In India, being beaten is accepted as a hazard of being married. It is a common phenomenon among the peasantry and the poor. If a wife goes to police station to lodge a complaint, in all probability the policemen, who also regularly beat their wives, will throw her out. She also gets no sympathy from her husband’s family. On the contrary, her mother-in-law and sister-in-law thoroughly enjoy her discomfiture. (78)

Wife bashing has always been and still exists in Indian society. Khushwant, ironically, remarks that it was the wife who did mistake by not cooking a good meal for her husband, and she deserved that thrashing, “I was made to feel like an interloper. I found out that all the woman was guilty of was having cooked a bad meal for her husband who had returned home late and somewhat drunk” (78). He also brings about the failure and selfishness of police officers to register the cases as they themselves are wife beaters. In the end, he requests the general public to shun these wife-beaters who continue to live in the civilized society. This is the only way to stop this menace to happen in the society:

It should be a matter of concern for the entire society. Personally, I have a strong revulsion for men who abuse or beat their women should be expelled from all clubs, and people who feel as strongly on the subject as I do should share no *hookah-paanee* with them. Unless we can raise strong public opinion against wife-beaters, wife-beating will continue. (79)

Khushwant minutely observes the social codes of Indian society. These things keep on happening even after the decades of independence. The man-woman relation has not elevated to the position where they respect each other. Whereas men still dominate the society, the women are considered the property and are beaten and scolded ruthlessly and the institution of marriage is considered by men just as a license for satisfying their libidinal appetite and satisfies their male ego by beating their wives.

He always levels with the readers and has always been to them transparently honest. He says exactly what comes to his mind, and doesn't give a damn to what others think. It takes courage to write in this exposed way. He also masters the art of capturing the many stray thoughts most of the people reject before they become conscious of them. He always levels with the reader. He has always been to his readers transparently honest. For Khushwant, the struggle for true openness and intimacy is a lifelong one. It takes courage to write in this exposed way. He also mastered the art of inscription and made many stray thoughts that the rest of us decline even before we are cognizant of them.

Khushwant believes there's no difference between journalism and literature. There's nothing too big or too small to write about, there's only good and bad writing. There is no distinction between high and low subjects.

I have never thought in those terms,' he once confessed. 'If something occurred to me in the morning, I put it down on paper and if it was a short piece, I sent it in as a middle. If it was long, it went as an article...I had no distinctions between what was journalism and what was literature – none at all.' Blurring that distinction is harder than it seems" (Reddy, Introduction xxii-iii).

Singh's essays are a hybridized form of prejudiced notions and neutral exposition marked by essential vigor, gentle irony, and an insuppressible humorous spirit. His chronological details are often combined with his perception of their relevance to modern world gives his essays their indispensable vivacity. Thus the combination subjective and the objective elements of the theory of stylistics can abundantly be seen in his modes of presentation and expression. The conversational approach to style, implying that manner and matter are separate and that one may think in a way different from one's mode of expressing it, does not prevail any longer because of the modern view which suggests that form and content are one and inseparable has gained dominance in recent times. In Khushwant's work the man and writer are in unanimity, as Shahane says "the style is the man" (142). At the same time, his style lies in the objectification of the artist's realization of his elocution of experience which he feels.

His satirical mode is one aspect of Singh's creative art; certainly, the most important one which makes him realist. As a realist, he identifies the monsters, exposes them, and derides them. They are always and essentially the targets of his stinging irony. He tries to keep the balance between the claims of sociological presentation and the virtues of psychological analysis. Singh's realism thus becomes part of moral universe.

Singh is an embodiment of the fusion of a social critic and creative artist. His creative faculty is not so much preoccupied, with the man as a secluded creature but with society in its totality and with the main issue of maintaining the balance between man and society, and makes him a social critic of eminence which indeed is the essence of his achievement.

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