

## Women, Wine and Worship: Redefining the Dirty-Old-Man

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**Abstract:** *Khushwant Singh, a man of proficiency and multi-expertise who witnessed the world for almost a century and eternalized its ever-changing affairs with the help of his fearless approach, forthright style, honest depiction, secular belief, objective outlook and humanitarian attitude, manifested through his journalistic, poetic, fictional and humorous approaches towards literature, is often alleged as a womanizer, drunkard, uncouth, self-centered and atheist persona. He was a man who believed in the freedom of expression and never vacillated in divulging his personal views before his readers. Unlike many of us, he lacked the veil of hypocrisy and was very clear about his stance. For him laughing at one's own-self and accepting one's own faults are the sine qua non of one's existence. Factually, Mario Miranda's caricature of Khushwant, sitting next to a pile of books, a bottle of scotch, and a girlie magazine, is a paradox. Though the tagline of his writings- Sex, scotch and scholarship- has been misconstrued by several, yet after reading him one can confirmedly testify that it is not the actual Khushwant, nor does it accurately represent his attitude towards women, pleasure and life, rather it is something India is still in need of: to accept the things as they are and to tell the truth rather than wrapping the world with ideology, as attested by Khushwant himself: "My mind is no dirtier than most men's. I am honest and I say it" ("We've Had So Many Donkeys As PM").*

*This paper endeavours to be an evidence of the real self of this so-called 'dirty old man'. Providing ample testimony the paper would discard the allegation against him and project him as an honest personality, a man of high moral who considered humanity as his religion, a nationalist, a man true to his words who should be "remembered as someone who made people smile".*

**Keywords:** *multi-expertise, honest, secular, allege, paradox, moral.*

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A larger than life persona whose fame reached every niche and alcove of south Asia, Khushwant Singh, was able to spread his dauntless views not only in Indian subcontinent, but overseas too, making himself a member of the global hall of fame for writers and columnists. So when we glean news from neighbouring Bangladesh deeply condoling his demise, or Pakistan that projects him as 'bon vivant'—we not only feel elated and on cloud nine, but it also makes us understand the stature of Singh's public face. William Walsh in his 1983 essay "India and the Novel" reckoned Khushwant Singh's writing as "much drier and cooler" (Walsh 254); though Walsh was compelled simultaneously to single out economical qualities and truthful voice of Singh both to the events and the people. Walsh is spot on when he goes further to attest that the narrative of this venerable Punjabi wordsmith "goes forward in a trim and athletic way and its unemphatic voice makes a genuine human comment" (254). As a matter of fact, such an opinion is true also to the

self that Mr. Khushwant possessed. The self-claimed ‘accidental’ writer had not a lone learned lying in his mind, and it becomes peradventure symbolic when *The Guardian* writes of this ‘King Leer’ who “penned his books and columns on yellow legal pads...” (“Indian Literary Legend Khushwant Singh Dies in Delhi Aged 99”)

Sardar Singh has had been attacked strongly by many and all those assaulters tried no stones unturned to choke his voice; but they only kept dreaming of that. Our ‘son of a gun’ remained fully loaded ever, with bomb shelling words. Commenting piquantly on Khushwant seems to be an easy task, as his malice and quill bestowed ample bane upon his detractors. His politico-social propagandas, or his personal inclination for malt and maiden—everything has remained under scanner for long. All the more, even when he is gone to meet his Maker, he has been incessantly adjudged as venomous as he was in his hay-days. It’s an easy job to name somebody especially by one’s co-citizens; but then we should remember his tenure of 42 years with media when Singh “seized India by the collar and shook it” (“India’s Gadfly”). And, to surmise his oeuvre is to shut eyes from the universe of *Illustrated Weekly*—a magazine that definitively assisted later-prominent artists like R.K.Laxman or Manto, who became only shinier and lustrous under the beneficial vigil of ‘the man in the light bulb’. Factually (and historically too), this is just a fjord of that sea whom we know as Khushwant. Quiet natural for a man—born and brought up in an undivided India, for whom there were no sides or borders, nor any barbed wire or LOC, and who was compelled to witness piles of petty politics later on—to take up his pen-cum-gun and fire ‘at will.’ Rancour and malevolence surrounded him quite obviously, much of which sprouted from sheer political malice against him; but then again, he himself felt ‘sad’ about the lack of a condom for his pen. His vocables and scripts proved to be blistering barnacles more and more as he never missed a chance to set upon a wide range of personages—supporters of strong ‘Hindutva’ as well as all-knowing Mullahs of the neighbouring nation—none was fortunate enough not to taste his sabre. Singh’s writing may not contain the classicism found in ‘Swami and Friends’ or *Tamas*, although it would be rash and erratic to mark his penmanship as lacking timelessness. A short but apt thought by Ramchandra Guha might befit here—“There was nothing petty or insecure about Khushwant; unlike other famous Indians, he welcomed jokes at his own expense, and criticism too.” (qtd. in Chouhan) Despite this unveiled verity of his persona, Singh is often alleged to hold a malefic-self. So let us dive deep to ferret about the man with ‘malice to one and all’.

Khushwant has written a good volume on ‘carnal’ topics for which he has been hugely averted. He held an exceedingly unlocked attitude towards corporal passion, partially because of his liberated upbringing and his foreign ventures as well; quite naturally his attitude towards ‘love’, to some extent, is that of Englishmen, for whom love is “an ephemeral and illusive concept” which is only a polished coat around the crude and real passion of ‘lust’. He clearly deemed ‘sex’ to be an ‘integral part of life’ (Sharma) and that is the sole foundation below its being an integral part of his drafts. And the disparity between him and his assaulters is simply that Singh obtained the nerve to converse candidly what he perceives without any contemplation of what people may think of him, something which maximum civilians are alarmed to do. Anyhow, he was truly a trendsetter in graphical depictions of physicality in Indo-Anglican writings which began as early as in the ‘50s with the appearance of *Train to Pakistan*. It was really a massive blow on the newly-born nation that was totally occupied with settling its beliefs and agendas under the leadership of J. L. Nehru. Conservatives (should we call them value-makers?) began to name it at the top of their voices, and Singh became a phenomena of notoriety without any further ado. What they have missed is the long tradition back in the days of Vedas when the topic of physicality was treated as an art form, and sages of those days were very keen at exploring the mysterious correlation and analogy betwixt the corporeal and spiritual. Khushwant held the tradition of a country which has produced the most elevated and widely read treatise on the art of sex, *Kama Sutra*, which inspired the architecture of several temples too. What Khushwant did may not be compared with that classicism, but it is worth referring. Quite possibly, accusations sprang up from his alleged handling of libidinous elements; but then, how come he became the most widely read author in the entire postcolonial literary canon? The answer is given by the least bothered persona himself: “My mind is no dirtier than most men’s. I am honest and I say it. Fantasizing is a common phenomenon and there’s no censorship here.” (“We’ve Had So Many Donkeys As PM”) The readers of Khushwant need not think at all to locate his honesty behind his open outlook, as his ultimate esteem attests. It is truly unique and genuine in its substance and aim—giving a great

blow of facts to every reader of the Anglophone community via his subtle wit and ever-flowing quill.

Critics have taken Khushwant too harshly not only for re-establishing physical passion in literature, but also for the portrayal of physical intimacies with microscopic details. This old man is often abused since his youth for advocating unwrapped depiction of sexuality, but readers of Khushwant ought to notice that he is not only minutiae in his illustration of libidinous elements, but minuteness is his forte; for instance, if we take his essay 'On Myself', we can locate a man revealing every titbit of his daily life, where starting with the mention of his alarm-clocks, Khushwant goes on depicting his schedule of entire day. A passage from the cited essay can bestow some better understanding: "I go into my study, switch on the kettle, get milk out of the fridge, a packet of Ginseng from a pewter box. I fill a platter with chilled milk and dilute it with hot water..." (Singh 8-9). Moreover, his insight into koels' (Cuckoo) different voice patterns expressed in his essay, 'The Month of May', offers ample corroboration of his nicety vision:

"As soon as the eastern sky turns grey, male koels lay claim to their airspace by a series of staccato *Urook, Urook*...The rest of the day the call is a monotonous *Koo-oo, Koo-oo*...While courting... sharp cries of *Kik, Kik!*...(female cuckoo) signals to her partner that her mission has been successful by triumphant cries, *Kuil, Kuil, Kuil!*" (Singh 142-3)

These expressions require no elucidation to make us recognize the effortless fact that blaming Khushwant only for his minute depiction of sex-elements without having the idea of his literary style can direct people to the flawed judgment of his personality.

The most argued contention foisted to Khushwant Singh was that of a 'womaniser'. A close study of Khushwant offers the idea that there are two prime reasons behind this exposé of his character. Firstly, his unfastened language to express his views on women, and secondly, his huge fan-following that was made up of the fair sex, which is less conversed a fact. We are well familiar with two declarations from Khushwant Singh, who was bold enough to be the first Indo-Pakistani scribe written on sensual topics so graphically, one is—"I have also come to the sad conclusion that I have always been a bit of a lecher. From the tender age of four right to the present when I have completed 97, it has been lechery that has been uppermost in my mind" and the other is—I have never been able to conform to the Indian ideal of regarding women as my mothers, sisters or daughters. Whatever their age, to me they were, and are, objects of lust."(qtd. in "I have always been a bit of a lecher: Writer Khushwant Singh"). Any quote suchlike is in vogue owing to the fact that they serve a queer purpose to vilify and traduce Singh, and steer people to call him a womaniser. But Judging Khushwant by grounding our views on just a few of his uttering would be defective and erratic on our part; therefore, a quick look over Khushwant's real-life occurrences with woman can lead us to the genuine evaluation of his personality. While moving to London for studying law, young Singh accompanied by his friends landed at Suez Canal where his pals went to brothels, but he was "far too scared to risk such a venture"(19), so he "took sly glances at dirty picture postcards"(19). It is after his moving to London that he lost his virginity with a lady-teacher of the modern school, where the lady encouraged him in doing so. But as soon as "the sexual Pandora's box"(21) was opened he realised that lust without love is not his cup of tea, so he turned eyes from her. After that several maidens of different age approached him but in spite of the fact that his "mind was more preoccupied with girls than with Roman law"(21), he "never went beyond kissing and cuddling them"(22). Finally, he fell in love with Kaval Malik and married her following all the Indian procedures starting from impressing the in-laws, through defeating many suitors of his beloved, to a formal wedding ceremony. After that he remained staunch to his 'formidable' wife. Though many Beauties and Intellects approached him, he never went beyond verbal flirtation which was never intended for. He is spot on while he states of his mind to be too much full with sensuous desires which is mirrored in his scripts as well as in his pronouncements; but factually, his alleged 'lechery' is nothing but a by-product of his 'mind', and in real life Khushwant has never been a lecher. There is not any lecherous activity in his life, and the affairs which he had before marriage were not uncommon, especially in the western societies.

Another underlying reason behind his ill-fame is his charisma among women. Dames of different age and social groups always sought his company and the cause is positively not his looks— as that can be validated by his photographs, but indubitably his literature, as well as his personality. It is his 'intellect' that charmed the damsels, rather than his physique. Khushwant knew the

female hearts very well and was able to talk to the secret selves of women, both through his tongue and ink; as affirmed by his son, Rahul Singh: “all his women friends...drop in to seek his advice on their romantic lives.”(Baweja) Moreover, he neither ornamented nor unreasonably criticised any of his characters, and in doing so he never differentiated man and woman, names and unknowns. To him everybody contains a mixture of fine and dire qualities—only the proportion varies among individuals. His honest depiction of woman along with his unveiled admittance of truth made him the most-read icon, but his success among women caused resentment in the minds male counterparts who possessed good-looks and better position, and resulted in his ill-fame as womaniser—that is further attested through his misinterpreted announcements. Factually, though women attracted him a lot—which is not an incredibly singular issue to him—Khushwant never went beyond any moral boundary; he respected the fair sex and believed in parity, as attested by him:

“I have no gender bias. If I have any, it is in favour of the female gender. I worked under a female boss (Mehra Masani) for two years and learnt to respect her ability and competence in running the Overseas Services of the A.I.Radio. She deserved to be made director general but was superseded and the job given to a man. I thought it was unfair.” (“Reservations about women’s reservation”)

His truthful voice and direct attitude towards female folk made him all the rage, and offered both fame and ill-fame; but there is no solid ground to name him ‘womaniser’ as the stated lechery of the so-called dirty-old-man resided in his mind only. For a perfect opposition, here we can introduce a figure who knew Singh over a span of 40 years—having collaborated with him to introduce a book on eroticism—Shobhaa De. It really sounds interesting what she broods:

“To a large extent he was responsible for creating a completely fake persona for himself as a great womanizer and a person who was constantly drunk. All of it was a spoof, a total construct. He was nothing of the kind. He admired beautiful women; which red-blooded man wouldn’t? But he was not lecherous. He never stepped out of bounds. He never did anything to embarrass his wife whom he was extremely respectful towards at all times and whom he adored and loved and almost worshipped.” (De)

The man who always favoured a single-malt Scotch (and what was his companion till his last hours) was all the same labeled synonymously with that very glass. Avtar Singh of *Yes Punjab* has severely pounced upon Khushwant on topics as rigorous and severe as alcoholic consumption and ‘Khalistan’; but what Avtar scrupulously focused in his column is that of accusing our ‘grand old man’ to be an x-factor for the widespread praxis of drinking: “Alcoholism is a damn curse on the Sikhs of today and Khushwant Singh did his best to glamorize its use in his writings and Parkash Badal has contributed immensely by implementing policies in Punjab that have made Punjab with the highest per capita consumption of Alcohol in the world.”(Singh, Avtar) He has already spoken about Singh to be something of a corrupt ideal for Sikhs—“Khushwant Singh was a bad role model for the Sikh youth as he glamorized the use of alcohol...”, and Avtar is just one of those multitudes of voices who were tremendously unhappy with Khushwant on that bone of contention. Voices from both within and beyond Punjab have regularly pointed out to all regarding this ‘problem’ with Sardarji, though none of them has become able to be a story of success in catching Singh in some ‘loose’ moments or with not-so-gentle talks. He was a man who never had uttered a word under the charm of malt, maintaining it all through his life. Defending the controversy of being a drunkard Khushwant quite fittingly whispered:

“...drinking is not a vice, drunkenness is. All over the world adults are allowed to drink when and what they like. It is only when they get drunk and misbehave that they are arrested. Drink like a gentleman or a lady; it is a civilised thing to do. It breaks the ice and encourages bonding. If England had no pubs, life in the country would become drab. All over Europe the making of wine has become a fine art. People have wine-cellars in their homes; Europeans have their favourite wine with both meals. No one is any the worse for doing so” (qtd. in “The absolute best quotes of writer Khushwant Singh from his column ‘With Malice Towards One and All’”)

Those who knew him closely are well aware of these facts—it is only the distant onlookers who smell alcohol and come quickly to the verdict. What’s more, blaming (or somewhat ‘naming’)

Khushwant solely for the extensive exploit of hard-drinks among the Sikhs won't help much—it is the folks of Punjab who have had inclination for drinking liquor, oftentimes recognising it as *the* part and parcel of their mundane routine. It is an honour to mention here the widely-read author Mark Manuel who has spent quite a good time with Sardarji, post-which he published his *The Sardar of Scotch*—an excellent piece of writing that fabulously portrays Khushwant and his fondness for drinking as something like a signature of him, and not anything more. Manuel has showed brilliant level of wit, and his dilly-dally with Singh turned out to be a stupendous context to know this 'grand old man' from a shorter proximity. Singh's attitude towards alcoholic consumption is well revealed when he utters: "... I have never been drunk even once in the last 60 years of drinking." ("Sardar Khushwant Singh")

Sardar Singh, being a Sikh to the lees of heart, maintained a razor-edged excruciating profile in his opinions related to religion and never displayed any propensity towards religious faith. His rather was a caustic voice while speaking of any such ways of trusting an ideology or institution—thus it really knocks us wonderstruck when the world recognizes him as a topmost scribe to write on Sikhs. *Pundits* around the globe have showed colossal criticism on Khushwant's stance, naming it nothing but a variety of dichotomy; and it looks that they are a bit right too. Khushwant's agnostic approach together with his 'new religion' have been severely analysed and tailored; it was received by many contemporary (and later) critics like a new law book. Even more, a few of them went further into earmarking those *edicts* as "new constitution" for the people—perchance they got a sniff of 'Sanjay Gandhism' there. Factually, many of the points which 'new religion' offers were intuitively there in the mind of Gandhi—whom Khushwant once patted as "a lovable goonda". It is the vinegar towards Sanjay Gandhi that most of the people have in their minds since the days of Emergency, which could have fanned the flames against Khushwant to boot. The philosophising voice of Singh is truly democratic otherwise—often brushing on the fringes of Marxian theories, making the entirety excessively engrossing. Conversely, consideration of Singh's approach to religion in his essay, 'Need for a New Religion in India', without any biased and prejudiced opinion is surely to influence people of sense as his objective was solely to channelize men's potential from unknown religious frenzy to a path which can lead to the ultimate goal of humanity. In his own words: "new religion for India would be primarily based on the work ethic." (qtd. in Chopra) This social thinker only sought after the betterment of his land and its people and therefore offered his perception regarding this issue; but some ever-criticising reviewers overlooking this unambiguous fact deliberately focused on his so-called linguistic error (that too was intentional) of titling his views as a 'religion', rather than a 'constitution'. Quite obviously, he picked the name of 'new religion' as to him religious is nothing but the 'opium of the masses' and he wishes his People to follow his ideas—that are not personal, but for the nation—as they chase religion. Moreover, there is justly very weighty sagacity behind each ideology of his 'new religion'; for instance, his will of banning 'astrology' is only to guide people to self-reliance and that enclosed an historical exemplification too—as he pointed the loss of the third battle of Panipat by the Marathas because of the whim of Bhau Saheb to consult an astrologer (Chopra); he intended to outlaw shikar (hunting) to craft the importance of preserving our eco-system—that is in vogue nowadays as people grew to be anxious about this matter; his idea that even retired people should work is very logical too as that can be helpful both to themselves and the land, again he highlights the need of family planning and preservation of environment. These suggestions can never be misinterpreted as something harmful. Factually, his proposition of a 'new religion' was his subjective opinion and he must be congratulated for that effort as he at least contemplated some solution to the ever-increasing problems of his country. In "Religion Versus Morality" he separated religion from morality as to him it lacked humanity since the majority of religious sects focus more on rituals than the lessons of humanity and thus not necessarily upgrade people to good human beings. Pramod K Nayar rightly pointed that Singh "with his peculiar combination of humour and serious writing, is revealing the sad truth of India's 'educated' class." (qtd. in Chopra) Khushwant is vigorously criticised for his attack on religion but the commons never hated him as they certainly identified the threads of truth of his voice.

Religion had remained all the more ailing for Singh each time it took the façade of politics; in his own words: "I have no grievance against people who believe in God, go to places of worship and waste a lot of time in prayer. It's their business, if they get something out of it, they are welcome.

But institutionalised religion is a breeding ground for prejudice and hatred without exception...”(qtd. in Reddy) We all possess the knowledge his opinions against Khalistan and Jarnail Singh (whom many still laud as 'Baba'). For many Sikhs, Khushwant has continued to exist as the traitor for not supporting a separatist movement; moreover, he was *the* most knowledgeable among Sikhs who held some powerful editorial positions. He wrote extensively against the very demand of Khalistan and even warned Sikhs against the move. Notwithstanding the fact that Khushwant Singh never received any bullet piercing into his physique, his letter alcovs clutch loads of execrated epistles. It would be interesting to mention a distant letter from Canada addressed Khushwant with some assorted abuses, with the cover of that missive read “Bastard Khushwant Singh, India”. The grand old man's own words may bear substantiation of his outlook: “I was most impressed by the efficiency of the Indian Postal Service in locating the address of the one and only bastard in the country. I showed it to all my friends with great gusto. Then in utter disgust my wife tore it up. What a loss!” (“From Uma with love — Gaumutra”) Thus another time we suss out Khushwant Singh who made tee-hee at his other sides, adored his coexistents, and walked the earth on his own provisos.

Apart from these conversed assertions, dissension and altercation circumscribed him all the time. He was named 'Khusamat Singh' for his propinquity with the Congress party—which does not necessarily mean he kneeled before the Gandhi family; for a counter, people often fail to remember how he stood against 'Operation Blue Star' and the Riot of Delhi, he even returned the decoration of Padma Bhushan in 1984 in gripe against the storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar by the Army. Yet as his autobiography was getting published, he confronted all the same. His granddaughter Naina has marked that event minutely (Davidar). An Order of Injunction in the Delhi High Court kept the led on the promulgation of his memoirs which made it compulsory for him to face court. All that was created by the politician (whom Singh has mentored for some time), Maneka Gandhi, because of his loud and clear comments about how she was thrown out from her position—lot of it was there in the book. But how can we bank on Singh in illustrations suchlike who has not even spared his own better half while sketching her as not-so-lovely figure in that very book, in his words: “I wrote the absolute truth about those people I happened to know in my life...” (Sharma) It languished for six years before the High Court allowed it to be published. To celebrate, Naina said, her grandfather dispatched her to buy the family some 'Kwality' ice cream. He was thus a straightforward persona who took pleasure in the simple amusements of life that permeated his lettering. While being asked the reason behind his dauntless and uninhibited attitude, Singh replied:

“Perhaps the seeds of my fearlessness lie in my upbringing. I was born and brought up in an atmosphere that encouraged me to think freely and also provided ample opportunities for self-expression. Growing up in such a carefree environment emboldened my spirit to a great extent. Then when I took to writing, I made it a point to be absolutely honest with myself. But in this process I lost many good friends and acquired a good many enemies.”(Sharma)

Again, he is often named for being a Pakistani by birth; and really, he was the “last Pakistani living on Indian soil” (Masood)—only with the difference that he never believed in thus 'ill-created' nations! His association with Pakistani figures, University College in Lahore and many other acquaintances beyond the border created natural storms in the alleys of North and South blocks of Delhi—oftentimes going beyond, but that never disturbed his candid hand at all. Moreover, having seen the Partition through his own eyes and sketched a 'Mano Majra' painstakingly, he always feared such symptoms to recur. His proclamation to be the only Sikh to oppose Jarnail Singh and Bhindranwale bears ample testimony of that—an antagonism that cost the Government of India a troop of armed guards around his abode for a decade. In a country like India where along with the intelligentsia the pieties of hypocrites rules the country, he was the non-tolerant of phoniness which makes him a role model for all Indian writers.

Despite all alleges our 'Dirty-Old-Man' has a huge magnetism—not only in his homeland but beyond the borders as well—which is further attested by the admiration given to him both by the commons and the government. Besides being entitled with 'Padma Bhushan', Singh is further honoured with 'Punjab Ratan' along with the 'Sulabh International Award' for being the most honest Indian of the year. He had collided with Angus Wilson on the term of homosexuality—declining to recognize it as a form of love, when on the other hand he debated for Henry Miller

supporting non-censorship (Calder). While conversing about Singh's charismatic power one cannot miss one noteworthy occasion, in the 1950s, while he was dining at some grand London restaurant with the Minister in the Labour Government, Richard Crossman, his host was taken aside by the manager who told him that they would say nothing on this occasion, but usually they did not admit coloured gentlemen. Crossman went to the telephone and within half an hour an official came to inform the restaurant that their license to sell alcoholic drinks had been revoked. It took them some months to recover it, and their "policy" was instantly liberalized. This Panjabi obliquely created one instance of equality in the Occident (Calder). Furthermore, all the ambassadors who ever came to Delhi on new postings had an inclination to meet Khushwant in order to get an overview of the country, as he was seen as someone who was impartial and objective in his political assessments and not really directly aligned to any one party. It is solely this charm of Singh that made him a bloke beyond borders, and magnetism as such is solely responsible that a fistful of his ashes is resting at Hadali—his birthplace what has been 'partitioned' into Pakistan—as Singh had wished to be buried there a few days prior to his penultimate sleep when Pakistani writer and columnist Fakir Syed Aijazuddin met him (Tahir). Khushwant Singh has undoubtedly enlisted himself in the history of Indian English Literature with his 'passion for the world', 'enormous zest of life', and his fearless truthfulness, as he says: "I write what I believe in and don't care a damn about the consequences." (qtd. in Reddy)

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