

Depicting the Grotesque Characters and Settings in Khushwant Singh's "Kusum" and "The Great Difference" Short Stories

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Abstract—Khushwant Singh is a well-known Indian English writer with a distinct voice in creative writing and one of the most dynamic authors in the Indian English Literature canon. He pointed aggressively at diverse social, political, administrative, and religious conflicts through his writings. He described the affairs of the common people in a sardonic style that causes readers to grin at their actions. He has the enormous potential to draw these problems out. The writer Singh's fictional works are obnoxious, charming, nostalgic, and bitter at first glance, but after a deep reading into the text and context of this writer, the reader will realise that the author Singh was never hesitant to highlight society's foolishness, idiocy, and unorthodox habits, as well as bureaucratic blunders of various dimensions. The purpose of this study is to examine the grotesque in this situation. This paper looks at "Kusum" and "The Great Difference" by Khushwant Singh. It looks at the bizarre characters, themes, settings, and symbols that are associated with the grotesque and its related aspects. It also looks at the characters' motivations and the messages behind their actions and the use of strange settings.

Index Terms—absurd, body, Bakhtin, Caricature, Indian, Satire

I. INTRODUCTION

Actually, a short story is a fictional literary composition that is shorter in length than a novel. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as "the short story is an invented prose narrative, shorter than a novel, usually dealing with a few characters and aiming at unity of effect and often concentrating on the creation of mood rather than plot" (Merriam-Webster, n.d). The history of short stories has gone through many different stages. There were many myths, legends, fables, parables, and novels. The traditional narrative style can still be different from the one today, and it changes with the time. In English literature, the Elizabethans liked plays; the Romantics of the 18th century chose poetry; and the Victorians adopted the novel as their favourite form. All human societies and civilizations had their footsteps taken by a short story, yet it could not fade completely. Short stories, on the other hand, are becoming more popular all over the world. They are thought of as the youngest children of modern literature.

Animals and other non-humans were the primary characters in India's ancient Sanskrit tales, which date back many centuries. Sir William Jones and Max Muller said that only in the classical literature of India had animal tales been established, compared with the literature of other countries. The Indian English collection of short stories, like other similar pieces of literature from all over the world, is also older than the Indian Writings in English. The first English short story in 1898 was released to confirm this, and its name was Kamala Santhinadan's *Stories of Indian Christian Life* (Parvathi & Kusuma Harinath, 2018). However, at first glance, the short story in Indian Writing in English could be considered an offshoot of the Indo-Anglican novel. Later authors include A.S.P.Ayyar, Mulkraj Anand, R.K. Narayanan, Raja Rao, Manjeri S. Isvaran, Manohar Mangolkar, Khushwant Singh, Ruskin Bond, Jhumpa Lahiri, and others. The Indian Short Story in English has been a sophisticated way to think about social issues and a way to show how Indian society is in the present scenario.

Khushwant Singh was born as Khushal Singh in Hadali, British Raj (now Pakistan) in 1915. Singh is a renowned Indian novelist, short story writer, essayist, magazine and newspaper editor, attorney, journalist, diplomat, and politician. He is also recognised as a "Partition Writer" for his 1956 best-selling novel "Train to Pakistan," which was based on the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan and garnered him international renown. He studied at Government College, Lahore and King's College, Cambridge University, as well as the Inner Temple in London. Before joining the Indian Ministry of External Affairs in 1947, he spent several years practising law at the Lahore High Court. He began his career as a journalist with All India Radio in 1951. Khushwant then became the editor and founder of "Yojana" (1951–1953), in addition to other well-known newspapers and magazines throughout India.

It has been asserted that Khushwant was one of the most well-known and distinctive Indian authors because to his wit and the various writing styles and patterns exhibited in his works, which demystified a number of societal disorders

in Indian society. His major works of fiction and nonfiction include *Train to Pakistan* (1956), *Why I Supported the Emergency* (2004), *Delhi: A Novel* (1990), *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959), *The Company of Women* (1999), and *The Portrait of a Lady: Collected Stories* (2007). The award of the Padma Bhushan by the President of India in 1974 was one of the most prestigious honours, but he returned it since the Indian army had attacked the Golden Temple in Amritsar. In 2007, he nonetheless won the Padma Vibhushan Award. In 2006, Khushwant Singh received the Punjab Rattan Award, and in 2000, the Sulabh International Social Service Organization awarded him "Honest Man of the Year" for his "great and perceptive writing," courage, and sincerity. On the same occasion, the Chief Minister of the State of Andhra Pradesh referred to him as "a hilarious writer and an incorrigible believer in human kindness with a fearless mind" (Library of Congress New Delhi office, 2016, p. 1). In addition, he received the 2010 Sahitya Akademi Fellowship and the Order of Khalsa (Nishaan-E-Khalsa). Khushwant Singh was a member of the Rajya Sabha from 1980 to 1986. Moreover, the Library of Congress owns a vast collection of works by and about Khushwant. In 2014, he died of a heart arrest in New Delhi at the age of 99 (Considered a natural cause). Through his humorous writing style, he was able to make his readers laugh because of his literary accomplishments.

II. OBJECTIVES

This study's primary aim is to analyse and analyse the bizarre character behaviour, appearances, and many anomalous settings and themes that have been associated with grotesque theory. In addition to revealing the author's aims and purposes behind the employment of grotesque characters and their supporting elements in "Kusum" and "The Great Difference," these two short stories are included in Khushwant Singh's "Portrait of a Lady: Collected Stories" (2007). After that, the researcher will analyse and prove the real-time conflicts, complexity, differentiation, and realism of non-racial, non-religious, and non-regional horrific stories. Using these stories as examples, the researcher intends to achieve this objective.

III. GROTESQUE: ITS ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT AND CURRENT SITUATION

The term "grotesque" first appeared in English as a French loanword in the 1560s; however, it is derived from the Italian word "Grottesca," which refers to the "caves" and extravagant forms of Roman paintings, sculptures, and other structures. In addition, French academic and critic Remi Astruc asserts that there is a vast array of motifs and that the three fundamental tropes of the grotesque are duality, hybridity, and transformation. With the passage of time, however, the grotesque style has evolved and spread from old structural formations to modern literature, particularly dramas and fiction, and their many compositions. It is also strongly tied to satire and tragicomedy in order to depict loss, agony, disguise, and sympathy, and it is expanding into a number of other subject scenarios in response to contemporary developments. According to the Cambridge dictionary, the grotesque is "a painting or other artistic work with an image of a person that is ugly or unpleasant as its subject." Additionally, it is "weird, uncomfortable, particularly in a humorous or slightly frightening sense" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d). Even though these two lines of the definition make it clear what is ugly, these qualities are often found in mythological structures like old churches, temples, antique buildings, gothic architecture, arches, paintings, and even mythological statues that show the grotesque because of how they look.

Through this grotesque theory and its related themes, writers are also reflecting the animosity in humanity with their fictional, abnormal, ugly, subhuman, black-humoured, weird, absurd, sublime, and haunted personalities. Historically, up until the eighteenth century, a number of authors depicted the grotesque aspect of a character in their writings. The grotesque technique then concentrated on human behaviour and storytelling skills, focusing on atmosphere and the darkly humorous description of individuals. Negative themes like cruelty, immorality, satanism, anti-heroism, ruthlessness, spinelessness, hopelessness, being chased, violence, compassion, grief, sadism, adultery, clownishness, and insanity will be portrayed in current grotesque characters.

In addition, the influence of the Gothic genre and the grotesque characteristics focused solely on the south of the United States of America resulted in the development of a successful new genre known as "Southern Gothic." However, Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, and other prominent southern authors are the pioneers of the Southern Gothic genre because they contributed numerous stories to it. Another author linked with this literary tradition is Raymond Kennedy, but these three authors' contributions to the grotesque are also greatly impacted by their works. In any case, the remarkable grotesque writers are Eudora Welty, Tennessee Williams, Umberto Eco, Cormac McCarthy, Angela Carter, Katherine Dunn, Ian McEwan, Patrick McGrath, Richard Thomas, Jeanette Winterson, and Brain Evenson, from western society, who project elements of extreme pain, emotional illness, violence, abnormality, absurdity, and adultery in their fictional characters in order to question the human degradation in this modern society. Even authors such as Flannery O'Connor "never shied away from displaying the grotesques in human nature and other social failings; even their characters are replete with negative hues and are not sympathetic, arguing that it is the genuine hue of modern civilization" (Gopikrishna & Anilpremraj, 2020, p.640). In this continuation, the theory of grotesque realism offered by a Russian theorist named Mikhail Bakhtin in his work "Rabelais and His World" acts as a kind of spotlight to expose the intentions and reality behind the grotesque figures in a variety of literary works. According to Bakhtin (1984), the grotesque is an effective literary technique for satirising and criticising social and political situations. Also, he says that

the grotesque is a way of showing things that includes exaggerations, excesses, caricatures, and many other language excesses (Bakhtin, 1984).

IV. GROTESQUE IN INDIAN CONTEXT: FROM ANCIENT SANSKRIT REFERENCES TO THE MODERN INDIAN WRITINGS IN ENGLISH

The use of grotesque symbols in the Indian subcontinent is not new, since there are several hideous statues and constructions (half-human, demonic, and diverse legendary animals) sculpted in various old Hindu temple arches around India and its cultural sphere (South East Asian countries). However, the objective is the same as for mythological references, with the exception that certain sculptures represent demons and evil, and the remaining objects may have unique religious connotations, such as the numerous gods and their angels in Greek, Roman, and Latin literature and the statues depicting them. Even in recorded form, traditional Sanskrit literature contains vast grotesque or animalistic forms and characters in tales such as *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesha*, *Jataka* Narratives, and other moral stories, but the main objective of these tales is to teach children morals and respect. In addition, a number of Hindu religious mythologies and tales have grotesque or linked people or locales with varying purposes, as indicated by the scriptures (as per the texts, some characters may represent a sacred purpose and others may work for evil mottos). These Indian scriptures are currently being translated into English to facilitate global access and reading.

In Indian English literature, the modern grotesque differs from earlier grotesque forms since it is heavily drawn from and influenced by Western literary works. Mujral (2017) stated that the grotesque body in Indian comics is metaphorically tied to Mikhail Bakhtin's comparable conceptions of carnivalesque and grotesque forms and their related objects with archaic Indian connections (Mujral, 2017). However, narrative genres, including grotesque images and tropes that can be associated with the grotesque in satire, have been noted infrequently in discussions of Indian English literature. Even though the arrangement of these grotesque citations resembles Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "Grotesque Realism," Famous authors of fiction such as Khushwant Singh, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Raja Rao, Mukul Kesavan, Rohinton Mistry, Mangolkar, Kiran Nagarkar, O.V. Vijayan, and Indu Menon have written fiction that meets Bakhtin's criteria. And these Indian authors have engaged in the ideologically delicate theme of nation-imagining by making powerful use of bodily metaphors, ways of living, and methods of analysis of the grave socio-economic and political problems confronting both post-colonial and contemporary India (Sarma, 2013). And by exploring the hideous state and collapse of fictional bodies and scenarios, these Indian English writers attempted to make sense of the social body's disintegration and dissolution. For example, a modern Indian author named Indu Menon wrote about grotesque characters with bovine features. Many of her stories have themes and symbols of extreme grotesque, such as bloody, cruel, and gory, which are not for the faint of heart, and she celebrates the beauty of ugliness (Krishna, 2021).

V. THE GROTESQUE CHARACTERS AND SETTINGS IN "KUSUM" AND "THE GREAT DIFFERENCE" SHORT STORIES

Khushwant is a dynamic writer with a strong purpose, as evidenced by his use of wit, caustic narration, and dark comedy techniques. His short stories expose the concealed aspects of his creative writing. The majority of his works address a variety of contemporary societal issues as well as western culture. Due to his distinctive narration style and pattern, he received both positive and negative feedback. Because he harshly criticises society, Indian administration, modern cultures, impersonations, deteriorating relationships, and numerous other social disorders in his works. Mr. Singh is adept at exposing the depths of the human psyche; the author even attempts to uncover the motivations or logic behind human behaviour. Through his fiction, he looks into how the human brain works, taking the reader into the darkest parts of the mind.

The short story "Kusum" is about an Indian girl named Kusum Kumari who was only eighteen but appeared to be twenty-eight. In stark contrast to her generation, she dislikes makeup, cosmetics, and other beauty-related recommendations, and she is unconcerned with her physical appearance. This explains why she appears dull, overweight, and dated. However, her sense of style lags behind her antique appearance. According to Kusum, women's place is in the kitchen, and they should never be seen using their hands. Due to her appearance and thoughts, she is surrounded by older men and women, but no young men are interested in her. She too felt a small amount of regret, but she believed that principles and nature had compelled it upon her. She is a great distance from the present, yet she is mature and sage. Even though she looks strange, isn't interested in much, and has many different ideas, she does well in school and believes in virtue and kindness.

Kusum's friends gave her lipstick as a gift for her nineteenth birthday, but she took it as an insult and claimed she had thrown it away when, in reality, she had hidden it in her room. Without any enthusiastic or joyful circumstances, she is about to complete her university graduation in the same monotonous manner. Certainly, she had a lot of thoughts about herself (appearance), and one day, while she was thinking about random things, she drove down the wrong path on her bicycle, collided with an orange vendor, and received lustful and lewd remarks from him, which shocked her even more. Kusum began to question her appearance and allure, and she gradually began to examine herself in the mirror, applying rouge and lipstick to her lips and making other adjustments prior to doing so. After looking into it, she realised that she was also beautiful, as the mirror reflected her appearance.

Kusum "had no engagements." She had no distractions and she did not distract anybody" (Singh, 2009, p.63) and "Kusum had no use for modern fashions, nor did she have any interest in boys. She shunned sex. She had no use for make-up and cosmetics" (Singh, 2009, p. 64), and "She believed that a woman's place was in the kitchen." She believed that girls should never be seen with their heads uncovered" (Singh, 2009, p.64), and "since she looked unattractive, no man took notice of her" (Singh, 2009, p. 64). Based on the preceding lines concerning Kusum's feelings about herself, it is clear that there is a degree of loneliness and unhappiness in her life, and she may surrender to becoming nothing more than an obedient servant to her husband and wilfully relinquishing her small wishes. Even based on her age, her thoughts are too different from the rest of the population, where an average modern lady attempts to achieve as many of her objectives and ambitions as possible before and after marriage. However, she is a better thinker than the other girls in many areas, but she dislikes arguments.

In any case, the involvement of chapter "Change" begins in Kusum with the dispute with Orange selling Hawker, that incident, and while receiving amorous and rogue comments from him like: "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" (Singh, 2009, p. 65). However, roguish compliments led her to believe she was physically appealing. Following this, the alteration of her thoughts about herself began gradually as a result of these words, because she began to apply rouge and lipstick on her lips and began to believe that she was more beautiful this time, which gave her an enormous push. The shift in Kusum's thinking may raise many questions in the reader's mind, such as whether she is having a nervous breakdown and preferring external beauty over inside beauty like other women, or whether she has begun to believe that she is attractive and satisfied with herself. Kusum Kumari, Hawker, and an object called Mirror are the grotesque's reflections because the definition of grotesque and its subsequent vibes have a huge influence on these three characters, because at first, Kusum's physical appearance is explained differently with grotesque sarcasm, especially since the writer majorly focused on her body, mind, and periphery. In addition, McManus in her review remarked that: "What is disappointing about the story is the fact that men, in general, appear to be portrayed as shallow." For example, the reader is left to assume that Kusum will be alone because she is not physically appealing to the eye. However, there are many men in the world who would find intelligence far more appealing than physical beauty" (McManus, 2021, p. 1).

Mr. Singh has thus succeeded in projecting the hidden subjects in the human psyche, such as adultery, lust, and sexuality, which will be triggered out in the no-man's land by this hawker character's behavior. The irony is that the foul-mouthed individual is a hawker, yet a vulgar gesture, an expression of a sex symbol, unintentionally allows Kusum to think positively about her own. Kusum's suppressed psychological urge into action at the same time she believes she has a small stature and a corpulent body. As a result, these kinds of elements provide credence to the argument that Hawker is also a flawed and grotesque character. In addition to this, the mirror will directly come under the grotesque personality because a mirror is an object that does not speak or respond, but it speaks and reflects like a human to Kusum in this story, like as "An attractive dark-eyed girl with a mass of tumbled black hair adorned by a rosebud smiled back at her—"I should say so!" (Singh, 2009, p. 66). According to the story, the mirror is praising her. It is her intuition or gaze that praises her beauty, which allows her to accept herself no matter how she looks or how she thinks.

Coming to the examination of "The Great Difference," this story is based on criticising and mocking two major religions (Hindu and Islam) and their blind followers in India. Haji Hafiz Maulana, Swami Vashsvra Nanda, an unnamed Sikh man, and Mlle. Jeanne Dupont are the main characters in this short story. Communal insecurity, differences, disputes, hypocrisy, protest, and other related themes are central to this tale, and this narrative was told sarcastically and darkly by a Sikh character who is a sensible thinker in this short story. "The Maulana Sahib is on my right and the Swamiji is on my left. I lay back once more to glance through the many magazines I had collected for the journey—La Vie Parisienne, Lilliput, Men Only, Razzle, and Others" (Singh, 2009, p. 93). Based on these textual lines, the narrator is aware of these two religious representatives but still does not care about their presence. He is to allude to the French magazines, which are based on portraits and caricatures of naked women and half-human female bodies. These two religious speakers, on the other hand, don't know about the Sikh readings and are very determined to represent their religions at the World Congress for Faith in Paris.

In another scenario, the concealed hate is bent on the Sikh guy by the Hindu Swamiji and Muslim Maulana as the three lead to Paris. Similar warnings were given to the Sikh man when the Maulana went to Latrin: "Even if you have no religious belief, you should not eat with Moslems" (Singh, 2009, p. 95). "They are outcasts and dirty people." Didn't you see the very jug he carried into the latrine he uses for drinking water? It is most unbecoming of you, a Sikh, whose ancestors fought the Moslems, to eat with him!" (p. 94). After a while, when Swamiji stepped out for a nature call with a brass jug instead of using the latrine in a train, Maulana began to finger Swamiji and say in a pitying tone to the Sikh character, "I wonder when God will teach these Hindus some sense!" (Singh, 2009, p. 94). As an extra, Maulana even attacked Sikhism in a mild tone: "He (Guru Nanak Baba) tried to unite Hindus and Moslems, but the Hindu is incapable of reason." He only understands the sword" (Singh, 2009, p. 95). So, based on these dialogues, these religious people have complained and criticised each other in hushed tones to this neutral and rational Sikh narrator, who is unconcerned with faith. Thus, here the writer reflects the hidden ugliness, hostility, barbaric intuitions, partiality, and mercilessness of fellow humans in Indian society on a communal basis through these two religious characters. And Swamiji and Maulana are symbols of caricature characters, which will subsequently fall under the grotesque because Swamiji and Maulana have blamed each other for their living habits, but they are not interested in learning about or correcting

themselves in the aspects of ill manners, negative mindset, and their associated habits, which means they are not willing to clean up the filth in their minds, just like how the caricature characters represent hypocrites and different stereotypes based on mocking an individual or political figures like Swamiji and Maulana. Where these characters are depicted by the author Khushwant as "these typically Rabelaisian and carnivalesque images of the people and their ruler broaden and deepen to an extraordinary degree the actual political problem of the Piedmont occupation. They link the historical event to the whole, to the constantly growing and renewed world" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 450).

From the scenario in Paris, individuals and environments will therefore begin to tantalise the reader with different interactions and other abnormalities in characters, such as for Dupont: "She looked too much like a creature of the flesh to be seen in realms spiritual" (Singh, 2009, p. 96); "her steatopygous behind was an invitation to lustfulness, forbidden by the laws of man" (Singh, 2009, p. 96). The writer stated in his description of this character that after studying this woman's (Mlle. Dupont's) physique, he determined that her appearance and dress code were not appropriate for that religious congress, which had a sacred purpose. Another absurd issue is that Dupont doesn't know more than French, and since Swamiji and Maulana don't speak French, these spokesmen asked the Sikh man to translate her statements for them. Using native language and phrases in the story is also grotesque. With the exception of the Sikh man, the other characters used their native languages and phrases. The use of indigenous terminology is evident in this story. Even the discussion has been prepared in a different individual setting for their (religious representatives') messages to be delivered before Dupont, which is another strange thing that is distracting attention away from the actual goal of the congress. So, the Sikh narrator had some "cogitations of things to come" (p. 97) in his heart, where he may be aware of what is going to happen or might be sensed upon; as a result, he even started to leave the conference hall and then the building, but on reception, a young lady greeted him and handed him the envelope with "two lines apologizing for her inability to let me know a day in advance, and in any case---'je comprends bien la différence' (if I understand the difference)" (Singh, 2009, p. 97).

This means that the story's behaviour and settings are utterly disorganised from what is expected, particularly the behaviour, appearance, and scenario, which are different from what is expected, and that these characters are something that distracts aberrant and defects from the actual world. Even the host's actions at the Paris meeting raise questions about their motives, such as whether they wanted to hear about religious differences or if these delegates were invited for a luring reason for Dupont. Based on the textual analysis, the characters Maulana and Swamiji will be classified as caricature personalities (symbols of hypocrites, stereotypes, and ignorance) with grotesque associated traits. As such, Miss Dupont is a grotesque character because her physical appearance and conduct with the other characters increase the audience's perplexity and lustfulness, as "the philosophy behind the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque body is drawn from the world view of mediaeval man that considered the human body as unfinished, as opposed to the Renaissance notion of humans as complete beings" (Moghadam & Termizi, 2017, p. 40). While Mr. Singh in this story remains a sensible and impartial-minded figure who is aware of these gimmicks beforehand, holding the faith congress in Paris is a little different, given that Paris is a world capital for modern western fashion and a stockpile for emerging trends. It accurately reflects the intentions of the writer's views on religion; even Rinehart (2015) argued about Khushwant Singh's irreligiosity in his article and mentioned that he was "agonized" on religion and rejected the components of religion in his written contributions (Rinehart, 2015). Anyhow, Khushwant Singh was successful in demonstrating the hidden acts of vengeance, blind faith, bias, and insecurities between Hindus and Muslims in Indian society, as well as mocking self-proclaimed religious intellectuals with his narration and on conferences based on religious differences through his short story "The Great Difference."

VI. CONCLUSION

Finally, even if Khushwant's signature is complemented with bodies and intimate descriptions of male and female forms, his short stories are more inspiring because of his ideological influences, mainly in exposing the humbug in Indian society, where he mainly picks these short stories that come from ordinary people and their lives in society. So, it is evident to state that the writer presented different forms of grotesque in characters to reflect different views and perceptions of people in Indian society. Through the settings, the author brought to light the ugliness and evil intentions of the human mind to not only surprise the reader but also re-evaluate his or her subconscious mind and get away from those ugliness and evil intentions.

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