

Religious Spectrum in Khushwant Singh's Short Stories

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore anti-romantic orientation of religious landscape reflected through the short stories of Khushwant Singh in his two collections *Paradise & Other Stories* (2005) and *The Collected Short Stories of Khushwant Singh* (2005). The writer mocks at increasing religious temperature, pseudo-religious godmen, blind ritualistic adherence, credibility of spiritual illumination, role of karma, and significance of sacred places like temples and gurdwaras in the world's largest secular democracy, India. He maintains that the institution of religion is used as a smokescreen to hide growing violence, intolerance and bigotry. His deliberate renunciation of religion is a product of his thoughtful humanistic weltanschauung that preaches crucial need for evolving a new religious charter for 21st century people, which involves love for humanity, belief in rational inquiry, confidence in the work ethic, and equal opportunity for peaceful co-existence.

Keywords: Indian culture, religious landscape, holy choices, question of morality

India – the land of Ganges, the birthplace of four religions and home of various saints has a long history of fascinating and drawing devotees to her religious temperature. India's unchallenged religious precedence infuriates Khushwant Singh so much that he proclaims agnosticism, and denies conforming to the philosophy of an ever-existent God. He himself ridicules the concept of God in "Wrestling with the Almighty", saying that, "I came to the conclusion that the concept of God is like a gas balloon which will burst on contact with the pin of truth...In the religion I have evolved for myself and recommended to my readers God has no place" (374-375). He states that all religious texts are boringly "repetitive, banal and often illogical" (376) and reading the works of great writers happens to be more instructive than reading "religious prose and poetry [that] is largely an exercise in self-hypnosis" (*Truth, Love & a Little Malice* 376). His utter disgust with the world of religion is enormously highlighted in his short stories through religious penchants of his characters coupled with wolfish facets of the well-established institution of religion that is proving to be more destructive than beneficial in the modern era. Being a non-conformist, his objective is to expose downside of both Abrahamic and Hindic families of religions believing that actual strength of all major religions is lost because instead of curbing violence, they are playing an indispensable role in instigating social unrest, anarchy, extremism, communal breach, hatred and insatiable hostility among believers. He hates flying upon "magic carpet of faith" woven by age-old messengers; instead he prefers to build his conscience on a "solid, concrete bridge of reason" (Singh 32). He believes that God is an "undiscovered power" and "an illusion" that is why the idea of an omnipresent God ought to be discarded (28,

48). Singh's call for logical submission is captured vividly in “The Mark of Vishnu”, a story depicting the thrall of orthodoxy embedded in the consciousness of an old Hindu Brahmin named Gunga Ram who firmly believes in the trinity of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver) and Siva (the destroyer) but preferably, he observes obeisance to his beloved deity Vishnu in the incarnation of Kala Nag living in the hole of the lawn; proudly demonstrating its indomitable six feet long body and glistening black hood with its grandeur. Devout Gunga Ram takes delight in paying homage to the snake-god Vishnu by offering a saucer of milk every night to Kala Nag; as he believes that offering milk to the Nag would save every member of the family from its dangerous bite.

The character portrayal of Gunga Ram in the story captures the primitive ritual of worshipping snakes in India, in particular, its southern part is famously known for keeping up this archaic practice that had once been celebrated in Babylonian, Greek, Egyptian, Chinese, Arabian, Japanese and Nepalese cultures (Deane 41-77). In *The Worship of the Serpent* (1833), Deane informs his readers about the practice of eating “the heart and liver of serpents, for the purpose of acquiring...knowledge” in both Hindu and Arabian civilizations (77). With the advent of Islam, this particular custom was repudiated in the Arabian lands, but India still enjoys the status of a snake-loving country that proudly appreciates snake-worship through her famously held festival of Nag Panchami in which serpent-deities are honored with a considerable amount of milk in the similar fashion Gunga Ram offers milk to Kala Nag. Stylistically, the plot progresses with the induction of a contrasting picture pitting young generation against the older one. There are four stout school-going brothers in the habit of nagging their

only servant Gunga Ram for his blind adherence to the mundane ritualistic practice of offering milk to the snake. These boys serve as the writer's mouthpiece because they keep on questioning Gunga Ram's irrational beliefs in the due course of the story. Feeling unconvinced with Gunga Ram's convictions, inquisitive boys make fun of him by calling him a "stupid old Brahmin" whose ignorance has landed him into the sea of superstitions that is engulfing many other Indians into its enslaving fold. "The Mark of Vishnu" encapsulates a single credulous belief, but evaluation of present scenario in India reveals that there are various other common superstitions including bad dreams, broken-glass, black cats, astrological forecast, fear of eclipses, twitching of left eye, cawing crow promising arrival of guests, custom of throwing rice in the weddings, hanging shoes on newly purchased vehicles, putting black soot on face to ward off evil and house sweeping after sunset—all are considered highly unlucky. But the query is that apart from India, all regions in the world share superstitious elements in different measure, then why does Singh castigate India in particular? The obvious response comes from the writer's column "Fad is Vastu" in which he laments the fact that "no people in the world are more receptive towards irrational beliefs than...Indians" (33). He also imparts his conclusive knowledge through the radical approach of Vijay in "The Mulberry Tree" who strongly believes that "continuing backwardness" is the actual dilemma that is making "India a laughing stock of the world" (228-229). Following in Vijay's footsteps, little school boys challenge Gunga Ram's fundamental acquiescence to an established custom by rendering scientific information involving food habits of snakes that do not include daily milk intake, in fact snakes eat only once in many days.

Here, Singh shows that Kala Nag is the key object of focus in the story but it is evoking conflicting responses from both the parties namely Gunga Ram and school children. Interestingly, Kala Nag serves as a symbol of religious integrity for Gunga Ram but curious boys share a relationship of irreverence with the snake. They tell their servant about the story of a grass snake swallowing a frog that sticks in its throat like a blob eventually taking many days to dissolve and go down in its tail. This proud show of iconoclastic knowledge, contempt for sacred life and religious detachment perturb Gunga Ram so much that he warns them by saying that they will pay for it one day. On one hand, the writer paints orthodox Gunga Ram with profound detail to expose fanaticism in such devotees that makes reaching any compromising panacea impossible. On the other hand, there is a liberated voice embedded in the boys' consciousness. Through this stark juxtaposition, the writer employs two dominant mainstreams complicating the unified structure of Indian society. Above all, the curse of increasing fundamentalism is playing havoc with global harmony. Hence, Singh himself holds religious-maniacs, orthodox militants, Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, Vishva Hindu Parishad and Sangh Parivar responsible for religious crisis in the country in his book *The End of India* (2003). He strongly feels that:

The worst enemy of every religion is the fanatic who professes to follow it and tries to impose his view of his faith on others. People do not judge religions by what their prophets preached or how they lived but by the way their followers practice them. (16)

The real contemporary challenge lies in addressing the extremist mindset where

destructive fundamentalism grows. It is not that only Singh's collage of stories pinpoints the aftermaths of extreme religious choices. Comparative analysis of Hanif Kureishi's "My Son the Fanatic" also highlights how religious choices of Parvez and his son Ali create immutable differences between them. On one hand, Ali's mind is obsessed with Islamization, mosque, prayers and jihad. He questions Parvez's western ways of eating pork pies, enjoying drinks and the company of a prostitute, Bettina. Hence, agitated Parvez brutally punishes Ali for taking such liberty with him and bloody-faced Ali poses another complex question to his father at this crucial moment asking him that who is the fanatic now? This is important to notice how both the writers bring out the irony of the situation by showing psychological chambers of both the characters. Similar to Ali's holy preoccupation, Gunga Ram's monomaniacal devotion with sacred life including serpent, scorpion, centipede and wasps brings him under the spotlight in the narrative. Moreover, belittling efforts made by the boys fail to bring his religious confidence down, and, he considers boys' snake killing lab-activities and the gory description of a snake killing a Russels viper in the jar of methylated spirit completely sinful. By pitting old generation against the youngest one, the writer brings out puritanical beliefs in discord with unorthodox approach, religious fervor contrasted with unconventional dispositions, false assumptions challenged by logical reasoning and blind religious observance in confrontation with rationale. One is the voice of an unflinching worshipper representing stereotypical lot of dogged believers; second is a collective consciousness advocating rejection of superfluous rituals, alarming superstitions and psychological inertia deeply rooted into the religious structures of backward societies.

Upon finding Kala Nag's alfresco appearance, the way boys chase their prey,

vehemently break its back with bamboo sticks and, carry the body of snake into a tin-box to the school for preserving it in a lab-jar. From this stage onward, the writer alters the locale for the story by shifting it from a house (place of snake worship) to the school lab (platform of scientific reasoning) where a science teacher opens up the tin-box and scarcely saves himself from the angry cobra attacking to catch for his face. In the meantime, Gunga Ram appears at the lab-door with a jug and saucer full of milk to entertain the approaching Nag but, petulant cobra starts hissing and spitting in pain, eventually, awarding devout Gunga Ram with its fatal poison. The punch lines in “The Mark of Vishnu” accentuate the tragic fate of conformist Gunga Ram who dies in sheer pain after Kala Nag digs his fangs on his forehead where he bears a sandalwood V mark as a sign of obeisance to the deity. Hence, the audacious writer castigates regressive mindset, sheer ignorance, and blind confidence in false assumptions through the gullible face of his religiously devoted characters. Similar abomination is found in *The Discovery of India* (1946) in which Jawaharlal Nehru declares, “I was ashamed of much that I saw around me, of superstitious practices, of outworn ideas, and, above all, our subject and poverty-stricken state” (49).

Notably, this story is Singh’s attempt at fighting against old absurd notions, the way once Achebe fought against irrationality of African culture. The writer’s frustration is evident with the outcome of the story in which he assigns noxious qualities to holy customs and the institution of religion itself. Another point for consideration is that the flat character of Gunga Ram gets severely punished because of his inability to learn and educate himself. The writer strongly believes that education gives you the insight

to examine and judge things for yourself. And this is the obvious lack of education that primarily plays its role in costing Gunga Ram his life who behaves like a yoked bull with covered eyes unable to heed the scientific knowledge propounded by the boys. Moreover, the writer repeatedly employs devices of irony in his stories to expose darker sides as it is evident from the irony embedded in the title of "The Mark of Vishnu" where he questions god Vishnu's most celebrated powers of life preservation. Does the god justify his role by taking Gunga Ram's life? Does snake-love introduce any remarkable charisma in the character of this Brahmin? Why does Vishnu choose Gunga Ram for his wrath instead of the actual culprits? All of these questions provoke an anti-religious spirit, defying the need to follow old traditions of untenable beliefs. In fact, the writer has kept young disbelievers on the vantage ground because being disillusioned is a blessing in disguise rather than ignorantly losing one's life in the name of religious spirit. Disbelievers are portrayed as champions in this story and a resolute believer is shown as a loser. The writer has intentionally depicted four boys as a foil to Gunga Ram in order to show that survivors exercise deliberate thought while ignorants are often hunted with their own guns. The satirical aspect is that those who harmed the snake are alive but the person trying to compensate for the evil act is chosen for penance. Close analysis shows that Gunga Ram's compassion for wild creatures is in sync with the attitude of the mariner in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" who blesses water-snakes with benevolence and it brings him peace and lifts the curse brought on him after killing the innocent Albatross. But, the case of Gunga Ram is quite different, for he is punished instead of being saved for the crime in which he has performed no role. By contrast it is

clear that the mariner is peacefully liberated while Gunga Ram is captivated in the claws of death. Mariner's belief saves him while Gunga Ram is pushed towards his eternal abode.

Hence, the denouement of this narrative shows the barbarous face of religion that has historically played havoc with the world. Several brutal wars have been fought in the name of faith such as French wars of religion, Crusades, Reconquista of Spain against Muslims, Thirty Year's War, the troubles in Ireland, Palestine-Israel wars, Sudan conflicts, Nigerian fights, Iraqi sectarian tussles, Sikh genocide in India and Afghan Talibanization against America. Accordingly, Singh reveals absolute religious futility through "The Mark of Vishnu" and encourages living without conforming to the glory of religion. Besides, the human-animal relationship has played a vital role in showing how the snake has justified its animalism and Gunga Ram desperately fails in the executing human rational capacity. Moreover, "The Mark of Vishnu" clearly demonstrates clash between three worlds by pitting natural world against human world, human world against the world of superstitions and the world of religion against human-animal forces. All of the three worlds foster their designs with unending rivalry in the plot. But, the resolution of the story portrays the collapse of a single world revolving around religious institution and the other two worlds progress unstoppably with their assigned attributes in their respective moods.

"The Mark of Vishnu" shares an account of individual setback caused by religion whereas "Wanted: a son" deals with the grim application of social beliefs, status of religion in marital life, reality of places of worship and religiously inflicted psychologies of several characters on a larger canvas. It is a powerful story turning

the scales for irresistible yearning for a male heir and its culmination through immoral means. In this piece of writing, Singh has thoroughly charted two generations with their respective *modus vivendi* encompassing stark social realities in a religious-oriented society that entertains miscellaneous attitudes, atypical responses, multiple beliefs and mixed moral values of different ethnic groups. Moreover, a profound analysis shows that Singh follows Miltonic matrix in "Wanted: a son" by subtly illustrating "inscrutable and strange ways of God" (152) as Milton had to "justify the ways of God to men" in *Paradise Lost* (2).

Stylistically, the story is divided into three parts: first serves as a prologue, second screens Devi Lal's life and third impartially captures religious beliefs. Right from the exposition, the protagonist Devi Lal is depicted as an eager inquirer yet a skeptic. Surprisingly, unending metaphysical pursuits, friends' encouraging convictions, godmen succor and the euphoric birth of a grandson help him to ascertain the truth in an unseen divinity. Is it really possible to venerate God by borrowing explanations from others? A case study of Devi Lal's character shows unceasing turbulence in his mind that compels him to analyze the notion of an "all-knowing, just and merciful" Providence (151). Established religious ideals mystify him because if God is an existent power then why there is so much suffering in this world. He is unable to decipher what is there that makes God an apathetic fellow? Why do the prayers remain unanswered? Devi Lal's peculiar streak of skepticism complements to Singh's personal credo in his detailed columns about his meeting with Buddhist Dalai Lama in which he poses the same questions to the Tibetan leader that if God exists then why there is a rampant

injustice, cruelty, violence and suffering in the world (“Dialogue with the Dalai Lama” 126). In another column “Just God?” he questions the validity of an eternal power by asking if there is a powerful God then why he has no ruling values according to the legal “norms of justice” (48). Similarly Devi Lal’s inquiry rests on the same pillars of disbelief when he is faced with the challenge of finding plausible answers to the queries that why some people are born with brains, enjoying good health, living well in prosperity and begetting sons, while others are born dim-witted or diseased, remain poor all their lives and only beget daughters (152).

Generally Singh’s men share utter disbelief in God, for instance, agnostic Vijay in “The Mulberry Tree”, religiously indifferent Mohan Lal in “Karma”, unmoved Mr. Sen in “A Bride for the Sahib”, and nonconformist Brahmin Hari Mohan Pandey in “Life’s Horoscope”. Besides these skeptics, there is a different category of pseudo-religious men who are severely flogged by the writer for their hypocrisy. As far as the conglomeration of ardent believers is concerned, there are only a few in Singh’s short stories such as Gunga Ram in “The Mark of Vishnu”, Ramzan Ram Jawaya in “The Riot”, Peter Hansen in “A Punjab Pastoral” and Pesi Lalkaka in “The Bottom-Pincher”, but none of them truly epitomizes peaceful religiosity that is why the writer largely frowns upon them.

The institution of marriage is regarded sacred in many cultures around the world. Thousand years old Hindu culture recognizes matrimonial alliance as a social and *dharmic* obligation, for it is believed that conjugal commitment lasts not only for this life but for seven birth cycles. It is also believed that entwined karmas of both

the partners bring them closer through the wedlock. “Wanted: a son” unfolds marriage experiences of two generations in its plot: one of Devi Lal’s and second of his children. As far as Devi Lal’s marital life is concerned, it is a prototype of mainstream Indian connubial lives engaging in limited sensuousness and, yet detesting its unwanted outcome in the form of three burdensome daughters: Savitri, Leela and Naina Devi. At this point Singh shows how this particular aftermath plays havoc with the emotional and psychological equilibria of both the partners; for their craving for a son is denied by a “fickle God” (158). But, luckily after the gap of eight years, thirty-seven years old Janaki gets pregnant for the fourth time and, suggests aborting fetus under the impression that fourth child will be another female inclusion in the chain of her family. Ironically, the idea of dropping fetus does not make this couple religiously conscious. Whereas, strong condemnation of abortion is registered in Hindu scriptures such as Bhagavad Gita, Kaushitaki Upanishad, Vaishnava texts, Atharva Veda, Hindu Ethics—all of these texts strictly prohibit this sinful act. A famous Hindu scholar Sripati Chandrasekhar informs in his book *Abortion in a Crowded World* (1974) that “Hindu scriptures from the Vedic age down to the Smritis” disapprove of “*bhrunahatya* (fetus murder) or *farbhahatya* (pregnancy destruction)” and *Vishnu Smriti* also denounces infanticide, because it is “tantamount to killing of [a] holy or learned person” (44). According to *Puranas*, the prophesied Kali Yuga (Dark Age) has approached India because heinous abortions are in rife these days, *Bhagavad Gita* refers to it as “embryo murder”, *Vishnadharma Sutra* states that it is equal of killing a Brahmin; and *Hindu Ethics* considers it a violation of “personal integrity of the unborn” (“Unborn Child under Different Religions” 6-9).

Serious look at religious teachings shows that besides Hinduism, no religion in the world encourages this abusive practice, yet Singh mocks at the institution of religion for its inefficiency in eradicating the application of aberrant acts in the society. His religious coldness is a product of historical crisis attesting indefatigable rivalry between adherents of different credos, Indo-Pak partition tragedy, worldwide ethnic conflicts, ongoing episodes of violence and personal experiences in India.

The writer quickens the wheel of the plot and in one small paragraph where the readers are told how grateful Jankai and Devi Lal feel on the unexpected birth of a son Raj Kumar in the family and all three daughters are married off in their youths; for, it is believed that securing a good husband is more important than having an excellent education.

As far as religious stance on educating women is concerned, there are references to Vishnu and Shiva's feminine avatars, female gurus and well-versed women in Vedas. Hinduism is based on various texts supporting different positions on the same subject that is why, at times, it becomes hard to come up with a single determinable approach. But separate evaluation of significant books shows highly optimistic response for women, for instance, there is encouragement for women in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* whereas *Manu Smriti* puts restriction on women rights ("Hindu Women in the Mirror of Time: At Once a Goddess and a Slave?" p. 83). It is also observed that there is a contradictory face to Hindu society, on one hand, women enjoyed equal rights in Vedic and Gupta periods and female idols like Lakshmi, Parvati and Durga are revered by millions of devotees; whereas living women had been forced for undignified "self-immolation" known as *sati*.

It is also evident that every religion has exclusive specific moral codes to enlighten their followers so that they can successfully pursue the path to salvation. The question of morality is raised in the subplot of "Wanted: a son". The writer mocks at the marriage drama that is conducted by the parents right after the incident of Raj Kumar's civil marriage with a Sikh girl Baljit during the common Indian Police Service. A Hindu-Sikh conjugal alliance shocks the parents of both the families, therefore disappointed parents arrange for marriage ceremonies prescribed according to their respective religious norms. Religious sarcasm is woven into the narrative through the episodes of performing both, Sikh-Hindu rituals of *Anand Karaj* in a gurdwara and *pheras* in another temple. Singh colors the story through this marriage-parody in which a conscious couple ties nuptial knots for three times as Muslim Samina and Hindu Tashar does it in Ismat Chughtai's "Sacred Duty". The only difference between both the couples is that Raj and Baljit take it as a fun activity but Samina and Tashar consider it because all is done in the name of family honor. This is how both the writers bring out heartrending attitude of selfish adherents who use religious norms as a tool for sharpening their own axes. By depicting religious and social collision, Singh shows that societal pressure is a mighty power capable enough to defeat world's biggest institution. Another blow to moral values is exhibited when Raj and Baljit get completely frustrated with medical check-ups and nagging demand for a grandson but nothing happens in two-year period. From here onwards, the conflict in the plot is established which forces succumbed Baljit to visit some *peer's dargah* to seek his blessings. Physical excursions at the *dargah*, between Baljit and the caretaker of shrine, bear fruit.

The writer deliberately installs sensual feats into “Wanted: a son” in order to expose the reality of miracles, prayers, places of worship and shrewd holy men. The way Singh deconstructs their angelic image, lost conscience, and unveils brutish proclivities does really make his prose realistic, intrepid and complimentary. The Muslim caretaker’s foul play of mixing some drug in the prasad (sweet substance) and savagely ravishing Baljit’s privates corresponds to a similar instance in *I Shall not Hear the Nightingale* (1959) in which another Peer Sahib copulates with infidel Shunno with the intention of bringing her closer to Islam (157–158). Such carnal endeavors testify facade of piety maintained by the flock of holy people. Besides, the writer shows his repugnance by attaching awful attributes to most of the places of worship. In “Let Us Clean Our Temples”, he affirms that Hindu and Muslim places of worship are unclean locales and centers of corruption, for they are usually flooded with beggars and gullible pilgrims (145-147). There is another reason for attacking such places because Singh feels that holy zones have become “places of commerce from which parasites like priests, pandas, pujaris, mullahs, mujawars, granthis and ragis draw their sustenance” (376). His pragmatic stance upon building places for worship is also controversial because of his repeated slogans telling that home is the best and only legitimate place for worship and its verity cannot be denied. He also maintains:

When people acquire vested interests in places of worship, these places become bones of contention and subject to litigation and, far too often, attempts are made to seize them by force. The Kaaba has witnessed many bloody battles. So has the Sikhs’ Golden temple. The managements of

most Hindu temples and ashrams are periodically before the courts. (376)

Through these escapades, the writer shows unpredictable fate of morality that simply cannot be subdued by religious ethics. Likewise, Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India* claims that “moral approach is a changing one and depends upon the growing mind and an advancing civilization; it is conditioned by the mental climate of the age” (29). Apart from the subject of morality, Singh deals with the gospel of miracles by demonstrating how they occur in the lives of religiously devoted people. The statement in “A Love Affair in London” that “the age of miracles...[has] not passed” does not substantiate writer’s viewpoint because he repeatedly repudiates the possibility of miraculous happenings in his prose (184). His opinion is that miraculous escapes do not guarantee divine providence and they are simply chances of good luck as he maintains in the “The Mulberry Tree”. In his column “God Incarnate”, he openly states that he does not believe in “avatars or miracles” but “[he is] fascinated by people whose lives have been changed by...such phenomena” (135). Besides, he rejects Hindu, Buddhist and Jainist theory of *karma* that is based upon the ideology of good and bad deeds affecting an individual’s fate in the next reincarnations. Singh makes it a point that religious and spiritual endeavors are incapable of illuminating the life of a single devotee and they are helpless tools in the face of sexual appetite.

Recent studies show that women are religiously very active and their participation in religious rituals is greater than men. Undeniably, the role of women is very significant, for they are more inclined to contact holy men to find solutions for their problems, they have convenient schedules and no matter how much educated they are, they prefer

empirical understanding rather than logical one. These idiosyncratic streaks are seen in the characters of Janaki and Baljit in “Wanted: a son”. Although Baljit serves as a foil to Janaki because she is beautiful, educated, strong, professional and rich; on the other hand, Janaki is plain looking, less qualified, obedient, gentle and homely. But both of them share a common zeal for visiting temples, gurdwaras and shrines for the fulfillment of their solitary wish of acquiring a male heir to the family. Enormous societal pressure, family expectations and patriarchal influences are important *raison d’être* for superstitious bent in educated, semi-educated and uneducated women, and hence they rush for holy cult with high hopes.

Besides, Singh questions scriptural understanding of religious followers as it appears mechanical in nature. He maintains that lack of understanding of scriptural content produces greater mesmerizing feel, verbal fascination and appreciation for mantras (magical words) such as Om, ek Aumkar, Kirtan Sohila, Gayatri, Al Fatihah and Yaseen (“Mantric Power” 75). Similar conclusion is provided in “Wanted: a son” and “Paradise” in which Hindu Janaki finds hymn-singing in gurdwara very pleasant than “the loud chanting of Sanskrit shlokas”, Sikh Baljit silently listens to Fateha and Christian Margaret Bloom finds repetition of Om very soothing; however none of them bother to comprehend the exact sense, purpose and meaning for reciting such powerful words (Singh 157). In *Truth, Love & a Little Malice*, Singh expresses his viewpoint in these words:

The less we understand their meaning [religious texts], the greater is the potency we ascribe to them. Those in ancient languages like Pali, Sanskrit,

Greek, Latin, Arabic or Santbhasha have a stronger appeal because few people know their meanings. Their translations into languages which we can comprehend, robs them of much of their potency. Read in translation, the Gayatri Mantra, the Psalms, verses from the Quran like the Ayat ul Kursee or Sura Yaseen, and the Sikh's Sohila seem to lose their vaunted powers of healing and dispelling fear. (376)

Irreverent treatment of the story disillusioned its readers from the positivity attributed to religious doctrines; for the writer poses a very sensitive question to his readers that, if religious disciples do not find religious ethics worthy of observance then why do they cling to it and what is the use of pseudo-subscription to such components? The narrative "Wanted: a son" highlights premarital relationship, extramarital affair, Baljit's infidelity, Raj-Baljit's alcoholic and tobacco consumption—every move stands as a testimony to anti-religious spirit of contemporary individuals. A serious evaluation shows that crime of adultery is completely prohibited in both Hindu-Sikh religions. And Sikh prohibition laws restrict Sikhs' indulgence into premarital affairs, extramarital relations, consumption of tobacco, hemp, opium, alcohol, beef and pork (Langley 25). On the whole, religious expectancy does not prick the consciences of Singh's Raj and Baljit.

Indian history cannot be evaluated without mentioning of 1947 partition tragedy. For, Pakistan and India are created in the name of two-nation theory that directly corresponds to different religious identities of both the parties. It is religion that is playing a crucial role in determining Indo-Pak policies. Since partition India has

witnessed challenging presence of fundamentalists taking advantage of every religious confrontation and openly waging warfare against other groups of non-believers. Recent statistics show that blind waves of fundamentalism are enveloping both Eastern and Western hemispheres into its tenacious tentacles. But mounting graph of religious propagandas are affecting Eastern parts more than European ones because West has already defeated orthodox clergy and church in the past. The writer has outright odium for fundamentalists whose religion is to abuse others by spreading intolerance, anarchy, violence and old prejudices among naive people. In *The End of India*, he expresses his fears that evil forces are weakening world's largest democracy that has been an emblem of peace in the Ashokan period. His stance is "the country will break up" one day if extremist "dogs" are not going to leave the land of Mahatma Gandhi (3-22). He also condemns religious fundamentalists by derisively calling them "fundoos" and hoping that "they will eventually be thrown into the garbage can of history, where they belong" (22).

The breadth of writer's objections also envelops believers' modes of prayer in his fiction, for instance, in "The Mulberry Tree", the writer's mouthpiece Vijay castigates backward practice of offering milk to gods, in "The Great Difference" Maulana's prayer and Swamiji's meditation are mocked, in "Paradise" and *Burial at Sea* (2005) yoga lessons are ridiculed, in "The Convert" so-called proselytizing mission is derided and in "Zora Singh" the protagonist is ridiculed for setting up a prayer room in which Granth Sahib is draped with an expensive silk. An utter sense of rejection, negation of scriptures, prophets, messengers and avatars make the writer's prose very critical.

However, there are many other liberal writers who have followed the same pattern of shunning religious beliefs. Singh however, has an advantage as he provides unique remedies for believers in his famous essay entitled “The Search for a New Religion for India”. Once again, he argues that all the religions have been “creatures of their own times and circumstances” so there is a dire need to evolve a new religious spirit that can meet modern standards (233). His affirmation that the existence of God is disputed and hence the questions remain unanswered; the founders of religions are mortals and therefore they must only be followed for their exemplary qualities; trends of worshipping holy scriptures must end; a home ought to be considered as the only legitimate place of worship; Hindu philosophy of ahimsa must be followed; population must be controlled; and for the preservation of natural world, dead bodies must be buried instead of burning and polluting rivers and sea. Singh’s credo that “work is worship, but worship is not work”, defines his confidence in the strong work-ethic that is needed for eradicating societal evils of poverty, crime rate, suicidal ratio and corruption in the country. Singh argues through this article a more humane approach towards fellow beings; their love for humanity can help in creating an egalitarian society which has the potential of rising above religious and ethnic divide as Juggat Singh; a Sikh, in *Train to Pakistan* (1956) saves thousands of people, who belong to Muslim community by sacrificing his own life in the end.

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