
TRUTH, LOVE, AND A LITTLE MALICE: KHUSHWANT SINGH'S "OFFICIAL" AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Yubee Gill, Associate Professor, Department of English, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar

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Abstract: Khushwant Singh, the celebrated journalist, came out with his long-awaited autobiography in 2002. The persona of this author in his *Truth, Love* is fairly consistent with the one reflected in his earlier journalistic writings. This genre of writing which intends to talk about the self is often construed as an exercise in vanity or as a wild goose chase – the self, after all, is something elusive, and is even regarded, by many, as a fictional construct. Memory may colour one's past in its own idiosyncratic ways; incidents, for the remembering subject, may come to assume meanings quite different from the ones they had for the experiencing subject; and the process of conscious or unconscious suppressions may create complexities of its own. The reader finds herself confronting such questions, among others, in a deceptively straightforward, although thoroughly delectable, narrative in Singh's tale about his "self."

Keywords: Autobiography; memoir; perspective; the self; persona; memory.

But is it reasonable that I who am so private in my habits should claim to make public this knowledge of myself? . . . never did man treat a

subject which he knew or understood better than I understand the subject which I have undertaken: in that subject I am the most learned man alive. (Montaigne)

but we change.

We no longer knew who we were,
and at times we remember
the one who lives in us
and we ask him something, perhaps
to remember us,
to know at least we were he, that we
speak
with his voice,
but across the used-up years
he looks at us and doesn't recognize
us. (Pablo Neruda)

Tomorrow, when I wake, or I think I do, what shall I say of today? ... But in all that what truth will there be? (Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*)

Truth, Love and a Little Malice, the autobiography of Khushwant Singh, the incredibly popular journalist/author of India, came out in the year 2002. Yet, for his devoted readers, who had been eagerly waiting to know more about the life of that fascinating person, there was not much that was new in the volume. How else, one may think, would it have transpired for a writer whose journalism was suffused with strongly

subjective impressions of people and places and who, apart from sharing snippets of his life in his write-ups for various newspapers and magazines, had also been penning autobiographical articles occasionally? A thoroughly cultivated subjective attitude, in fact, used to be the hallmark of Singh's journalistic writings. One may take those earlier autobiographical snippets as a part of the process of his evolving autobiography, and they may remind one about the arbitrary nature of boundaries in an autobiographical text.

Autobiography has usually been seen as a purely egotistical genre. The trenchant remark by the renowned painter Amrita Shergil (who comes in for a worthwhile mention in *Truth, Love*: "Politeness was not one of her virtues; she believed in speaking her mind, however rude or unkind it be" [97].) goes to the heart of the uneasiness a person who thinks of writing an autobiography has reason to feel: "As a rule I dislike biographies and autobiographies. They ring false. Pomposity and exhibitionism. But I think I will like yours" ("Why Amrita-Shergil"). Significantly, the remarks were made in a letter to Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru after Shergil had received a copy sent by the would-be first Prime Minister of India. In the face of such questionings, it is not surprising that the writers of autobiography have to come out with protestations that their works are not exercises in vanity. Singh otherwise, too, is remembered for the self-deprecatory tone of his write-ups:

I am not a learned man. I am as far removed from being a scholar as anyone could be. I was a poor student, a briefless barrister, a

tactless diplomat and ended up as an ill-informed journalist. (*Khushwantnama* 85)

Success went to my head. I became a name-dropper. (*Truth, Love* 254)

The tone, nevertheless, gives us a fair idea of the tricks writers of autobiography take recourse to in order to soften the egotistical blow of the genre.

The literary form of autobiography, in another sense, remains poised quite precariously on the cliff-edge of fictionality. It, admittedly, is a genre about the self – but is there a way of reaching, knowing the self in an unproblematic manner? And isn't the idea of a consistent, unified self at odds with what much of the contemporary thought has to say about the linguistic, contextual construction of a fiction taken as the image of a self? Jacki Spicer sees the genre of autobiography caught in "the tension between language's referential promise and its threats of mendacity" (388). Paul de Man's pointed caveat about "the tropological structure that underlies all cognition, including cognition of self" (922) in his seminal "Autobiography as De-Facement" comes as a thorough deflation of the project of "the self." Linda Anderson reiterates the idea in her assertion that post de-Man, the Romantic Self is "fatally divided, threatened by representation, forced to summon up rhetorically the ghosts of a self they can never hope to be" (14). Which of the multiple selves, from still another perspective, one might have inhabited and moved through, becomes the focal point of an autobiographer? V. S. Pritchett's answer about this narrativizing "I" is that it may be

“a coarse averaging out of one’s many selves” (15). Singh’s view – “The gods in their wisdom did not grant me the gift of seeing myself as others see me” (*Vintage* 183) – may only be gesturing towards the extremely fraught nature of “the self” in the autobiographical venture. In the process, he does manage to indicate how the very process of writing about one’s life is an attempt to make sense of oneself – to others as well as to one’s own being: “The narrative activity in and of autobiography is an identity activity,” Paul J. Eakin reminds us (130). Autobiography, Anderson adds, is “turned to in the first place because it offers an unmediated and yet stabilizing wholeness for the self” (5). Weintraub makes another valid assertion that it is self at a particular point in time which has its perspective lording over autobiography:

The genuine autobiographical effort is guided by a desire to discern and to assign meaning to a life. This effort is usually dominating the writer’s “point of view,” in the most literal sense of the coordinate point in space and time at which the autobiographer stands to view his life. (824)

The persona of the author of *Truth, Love* appears to have a close affinity to the self of author around the year 1995, when the autobiography got completed (published with an additional chapter seven years later owing to a legal case against the book). The spillover effects of hindsight are all too evident in the text. One episode that manifests the near impossibility of capturing the past without creative modification by memory concerns the author’s early childhood where one may discern an adult looking through the eyes of a four-year-old

(5). Autobiography, in this sense, is a self-erasing venture: capturing the past as it had actually been experienced is an impossibility:

Elements of past experienced are wrenched loose a little bit from the context in which they originally stood; they are singled out because they are now seen to have a symptomatic meaning they may not have had before. (Weintraub 826)

The mixing of perspectives in the anecdote about the four-year-old child is an instance of this necessary evil of autobiography.

A workable distinction between memoirs and autobiography gets made sometimes to talk about the essential focus of writing about oneself. Linda Anderson makes a distinction between “serious” autobiography, written by the few who are capable of “sustained self-reflection,” and popular autobiography or memoir (8); while, according to Weintraub, it is a matter of difference of emphasis place on the external factual world and the inner world of subjectivity:

In memoir external fact is, indeed, translated into conscious experience, but the eye of the writer is focused less on the inner experience than on the external realm of fact. . . . at the other extremity an “ideal type” autobiography in which such a writer as Augustine dwells almost exclusively on the inner reflection of a life in which external fact only had an inner meaning. (823)

All writings about the self, in fact, partake of the aspects of memoirs and autobiography, the two extremes conceptualized by scholars about such writings: the respective

components of the two ideal types may differ from one text to another. Singh's *Truth, Love*, on that count, veers more towards memoirs than towards autobiography. It is only in the final chapters like "Wrestling with the Almighty" that he comes close to reflecting consciously over deeper aspects of self and its makings.

The persona of this author ("the figure of the author, as a ghostly presence" [388] as Spicer – echoing de Man – describes the autobiographical narrator), "Khushwant Singh" rather than Khushwant Singh, built assiduously over the decades in his syndicated columns in numerous newspapers and journals, remains fairly consistent in *Truth, Malice* as well. And, despite the author's disarming admission about this work being the outcome of "ageing loins" (2), the book is quintessential Khushwant in terms of its readability. Singh does not make bones about the popular path adopted by him, "Do not expect too much from it: some gossip, some titillation, some tearing of reputations, some amusement – that is the best I can offer" (*Truth, Malice* 2). But the public persona or the outer self which one presents to the others, is, as Sherif Hatata feels, usually an artifice, "an image" created in the prevalent patriarchal order (Hatata may be talking primarily about the Arab world, though his remark is not in any way less applicable to the rest of the world around us) and that "Within the outer construction the inner self remains hidden, carefully protected, like oyster in a shell" (124). The "confession" is also in keeping with the tradition of apologetics the writers take recourse to as justifications for their writing about themselves. Providing an apology by way of justification for the

composition of a literary work has long been a polite tradition, but it becomes an extremely sensitive question in writing about oneself (even though the writer, as in this case, might not have felt such pangs while writing shorter autobiographical pieces!). Therefore, while the "daughter, Mala Dayal, . . . bullied me into writing it," there are potent reasons for our author's agreeing to write his life: "I have been witness to many historical events, and as a journalist, I have interviewed many characters who played decisive roles in shaping them" (2). But that the desire to be remembered, after one has bid one's final adieu, is the very first cause behind the autobiographical intention is not denied by Singh. Here is part serious, part playful (the typical Khushwant Singh style) admission: "I have not done things which anyone else may feel are worth recording. My only chance of not being forgotten when I am dead and rotten is to write about things worth reading (2)." And all of this is there, expectedly, in the straightforwardly titled "Prologue: An Apology for Writing an Autobiography." This Prologue exemplifies the inside-outside, close-distant movement of perspective in an autobiography. Such paratexts, the Prologue here, often have a significant role in positioning the reader towards the content of a work. The Prologue also comes out with an indication about the authorial attitude and tone towards his "subject." Another reference to this attitude may be seen in Singh's belief that, "What is permissible in a biography is not suitable for an autobiography" (*Khushwantnama* 92), i.e., an autobiography is not a vehicle for self-praise.

Elsewhere, too, one finds instances where meanings and explanations get

assigned retrospectively to incidents from the past. The writer is conscious of the effects of forgetfulness: we get a reminder about the recollected nature of memories in *Truth, Love* while coming across “Then Manzur (or perhaps it was one of the other panel of Muslim lawyers) presented a third exhibit ...” (107). Earlier in the narrative, too, there is an indication of the battle against forgetfulness: “I am not sure why I decided to leave St Stephen’s to join Government College in Lahore for my Bachelor’s degree,” (39) which surprisingly gets contradicted by “My father no doubt thought it best that I acclimatize myself to Lahore before setting legal practice there” (40). But a rather surprising instance of the tricks memory (and, perhaps, the titular Malice) can play is related with the Nehru-Edwina Mountbatten episode, when a quiet dinner arranged by the two in Soho got interrupted by the paparazzi. We get two divergent explanations across Singh’s works about who informed the press photographers about the private dinner:

The restaurant owner recognized them and rang up the press to get publicity for his joint. (*Truth, Love* 138)

...it did not occur to him [Nehru] or to me that the only person who could have tipped off the press was Krishna Menon. (*Vintage Sardar* 31)

The discrepancy in the two statements is another illustration of how one’s remembrance of past may be tied up with one’s positioning in the present.

That past, nevertheless, also places the author in the midst of some of the most important events and persons of Indian history. Singh, in his diverse capacities as a

barrister, journalist, creative writer, diplomat and Rajya Sabha M.P., had had the chance of observing, and even working with, politicians, ministers, bureaucrats, litigants, journalists, writers and magistrates. *Truth, Love*, in many ways, comes off as an oblique look at a significant era of Indian history – epoch-making decades on each side of the declaration of Independence. Events suddenly came to a heady whirl in the year 1947. Much of the experiential impact of those turbulent times, when the noblest aspirations of the people of this subcontinent towards living as independent citizens were contradistinguished by the worst of atavistic impulses, gets poignantly conveyed by Singh. Singh, in contrast to the accounts of religious harmony in pre-independence India by the other writers, is forthright about there being “few instances of close friendships with Muslims” even during his college days (*Truth, Love* 43). Earlier in the book, we come across a reference to this tension: “We Sikhs and Hindus of Hadali lived with the Muslims in an uneasy but peaceful relationship” (5), though in the same chapter, Singh goes on to make the contrary claim too: “Who was the author of the perfidious lie that Muslims and Sikhs were sworn enemies? No animosity had soured relations between the Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus of Hadali” (10). The author also keeps reminding the reader about his great friendship with Manzur Qadir. One is able to see how the wider political happenings in the surcharged atmosphere of pre-independence India were impacting relations amongst communities and individuals.

Singh, expectedly, is at his vitriolic best while limning portraits of relatives, friends, acquaintances, politicians, diplomats

and – Women. What he says about Balwant Gargi – “every time Gargi produced a book, he lost a dozen of his friends” (*The Good* 14) – might have been experienced by him as well. Nevertheless, one also gets to know the astonishing sense of balance in Singh through some of these sketches. His college friend Pratap Lal, we come to learn, had tried to dissuade Singh’s fiancée from accepting Singh’s proposal of marriage, and had made “cartoons depicting me without my turban and my beard hanging down to my navel” (*Women and* 181). Singh shows a remarkable detachment in what he adds next about the cartoons: “They were very funny and extremely well drawn” (*Women and* 181). He goes on to describe Lal’s otherwise exceptional qualities of head and heart in quite a loving manner, and finishes his eulogy with the fine Shakespearian tribute – “This was a man.”

Being a man, certainly, is important for Singh! “Manliness,” one realizes, is a significant undercurrent in his writings. Apart from the prurient descriptions of the alleged affairs of some of the dramatis personae in the book and suggestive portrayal of a young beggar maid (239), there is a liberal use of four-letter words from Punjabi and Hindi in *Truth, Love*. There is more than one reference to sodomy in schools and colleges Singh attended, and there is talk of “catamites turned sodomites” (*Truth, Love* 44). His writings, otherwise full of salacious details, are surprisingly conservative about many other gender related matters. For instance, while trying to show his open-mindedness about queerness, Singh comes out with a statement which belies his claim: “Personally I have absolutely nothing against homosexuality as

I regard it as natural as bi-sexuality” (*Vintage* 150). What follows thereafter is surprising in the extreme and leaves no doubt about his stance, “You will have noticed that homosexuals often have ungainly shapes and their exaggerated gestures betray their inclinations” (*Vintage* 151). Statements like these often reveal Singh as a kind of barometer of popular opinion. In 1962, at a conference at Edinburgh, Singh, we are told, “came down heavily against homosexuality – not its practice, but its validity as a form of love” (Calder). Clearly, while there might have been a slackening of his rigid ideas about homosexuality, he was not entirely able to overcome his prejudice.

The persona of a liberal, truth-telling, forbearing human being comes under strain again when a few additional details spill out. One major point of debate, which Singh talks about in *Truth, Love* also, was Singh’s compliance during Emergency in India. The explanation provided by him – “My attitude to the Emergency was ambivalent” (257) – would be deemed highly inadequate by those critical of Singh’s role as a journalist during that period. Kuldip Nayar, the feisty journalist, who stood up to power during that period, while remaining an admirer of Singh, Nayar’s teacher at the law college at Lahore, drops a reminder, “At that time, Khushwant Singh was dubbed as Khushamat Singh” (Nayar 93). It is Nayar again who talks about Singh’s being offered the chief editorship of *The Indian Express*, because of Singh’s closeness to Indira and Sanjay Gandhi, and how the offer was withdrawn by Ramnath Goenka, the proprietor, when the latter came to know about the impending end of Emergency (93). The incident is a significant

omission in Singh's writings, reminding one again of the myth of tell-all autobiographies. Elsewhere, Singh comes close to frankly admitting his lapses which, he confesses, were because of his proximity to Mrs. Indira Gandhi and, especially, to Sanjay Gandhi, who was then being seen as Prime Minister in waiting:

I liked Sanjay. But I am certain that if he had lived, this country would not have been a democracy. There would have been order and much faster development, but no democracy. I have been asked if, in that case, I would still have supported him. I don't know. He would have got around me. He could be a real charmer. Besides, he was a friend, and he had been real good to me. . . . He was loyal, and so was I. (*The Good* 187-88)

Another incident which brings out Singh's vulnerability is an imaginary obituary for him by Dhiren Bhagat in 1983. Singh, who had written an obituary for himself when he was in his twenties, and another which was intended to be actually used after "Bade Mian" (Singh's humorous term for God) had taken him away, could not bring himself to forgive Bhagat (Pillai 203). Eventually, it was an instance of extremely tragic irony that Singh was to write an obituary for Bhagat when the latter died in 1988 at the age of thirty one. One can detect shades of bitterness in the otherwise favourable review Singh wrote of Bhagat's book in 1990 where he talks about what he takes to be Bhagat's "brash start trying to attract attention by writing rude articles about established writers" ("In Memoriam"). Such instances, one has to acknowledge, are

almost exceptions in Singh's writings and are quite uncharacteristic of him.

Singh's autobiographical writings create a strong image of a person who was so many things rolled into one. But this precisely is what the autobiographical effort is tantamount to – an image, one possibility among the myriad others. There is a kind of continuity in Singh's various writings, the unmistakable touch of a being who lived his life to the fullest and whose style of journalism and writing had an inimitable flavour of their own. One also realizes that to talk about autobiography, or life, one has to fall back on to the terms which have been proved to be untenable by contemporary thinkers on life and culture. Also, the genre of autobiography is one which would eventually turn towards the reader, pointing obliquely to the myths and fictions which underpin the notion of a coherent selfhood. Failure to see subjectivities as constructs, blindness toward the myths behind individuality, may only serve to keep humanity divided in the name of essentialized racial, ethnic or gender identities.

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