

Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture-18
Khuswant Singh's "Karma" Overview

Hello and welcome to another conversation between me and Miss. Arya she is an intern on my course short fiction and Indian literature. And the conversation that we are going to have is about Khuswant Singh's story karma. **"Professor-student conversation starts"** hello Arya, hello mam hi, so how is karma for you karma is a very very exciting story you know the reason is that it is neatly structured it is a story which is almost perfect in some sense.

There is a proper beginning or proper middle and a proper end to the story and it is almost as Khuswant saying is employing his theories about how a classic short story is to be on this particular writing that he has done. So, it is very neat and with the proper twist of the end to he always says that there should be a twist at the end of the story it is he says that twist should be like a scorpions thing, it should stink either the readers or it should stink some with the in the story metaphorically speaking.

So, it is a perfect story and I really enjoyed reading it and I hope the readers will too readers on this course who will enjoy this story, mam interestingly the story is actually said in a railway station. So, can you elaborate on the use of railway station which is a public space by Khuswant Singh in karma yeah it is very it is a yeah.

It is very significant that the story is not said within some domestic space it is actually a very very public space as you mention it is also a transitory space you know people move through that space. So, it we sir Mohan inside waiting room which he is going to vacate very shortly and we also see his wife outside the waiting room and they all board the train in a short while.

So, the railway and the train is a very very interesting setting and it can have a certain meanings in terms of the philosophy of this story and in terms of karma we can see all the divisions neatly

played out. The divisions between sir Mohan and his wife, he is neatly played out in the spaces that they occupy, 1 is inside protected within 4 walls in the waiting room and the other is exposed you know exposed to the weather she is just outside .

And she is having a conversation with a coolie and that itself tells you something about the power structure between the 2. And then 1 occupies the first class compartment the other occupies as this the Zenana which is lower in rank and that Zenana is usually occupied O is it reserved entirely for the women. So, it is as I said the setting tells you a lot of ideological in information meaningful information about how these people see the world right.

So, that setting has an important consequence for the entire story and even it plays the functional role as well. The train plays the functional role in the narrative it means somebody behind and it takes away somebody with them you know somebody manages to re-suggest nation and somebody does not manage to re-suggest nation and the place the soil sport in a case of sir Mohan Lal.

Okay mam in one of the most important incidents the story like when Mohan makes a general comments of India after looking at the mirror like he talks like a foreigner. So, it is mentioned there he is just spend only 5 years at England, does he really identifies himself with an Englishman or as he pretend to be so. Yeah it is a 2 part question. Let me advise the first question.

First that is about the mirror right and the comparison between the mirror and India itself I will read that relevant extract for the benefit on our readers and listeners. He says on looking at the mirror he says, you are so very much like everything else in this country, inefficient, dirty, in different he murmured. The mirror smile back at sir Mohan you are a bit of alright old chap it said distinguish, efficient, even handsome.

That neatly trimmed moustache the suit from several row with a coronation in the button hole, the aroma of (()) (05:02) talcum powder and scented soap all about you, yes old fellow, you are a bit of alright. So, this is a very interesting experience between sir Mohan and a mirror the

narrator imagines the mirror to respond to sir Mohan. So, this is almost a fantastic conversation happening between the 2 is not it.

So, when he makes some comments about India using the figure of the mirror, the mirror is not quite, it responds, it talks back and that tells you something about the narrator and the author of this particular story. And it says O yeah yes of course I am inefficient, dirty and all these things that you mention you alright and that it said almost sarcastically.

And the mirror makes all these comments about specific comments about the fruit from several rope which is a street in London, which is raisins is for you know , a tailoring suits. And it says that you have scented soap all over aroma of scented soap talcum powder. So, you are okay you know you seems alright, so that comment back that is sarcastic comment back from the mirror is a hint somehow a hint about you know maybe the psyche of the narrative.

Or the author who manages this story world, the things might be you know things might happen in such a way that this sir Mohan might not get away with all these nasty comments that he makes about the state of this country. So, this is a little bit of straight but it tells you how things are going to work out you know at some level, mam about Mohan O yes.

Mohan he spends about 5 years in the United Kingdom great Britain ad he says he has spend about 45 years in this country right. And at 1 point the story he makes a comparison between these 2 periods of his life in India and his life in the UK and that is again a very very interesting extract in the story. He says 5 years of a crowded glorious life in great Britain in London, what far more than the 45 in India with his dirty, vulgar countryman with sowed details of the row to successs of nocturnal visits to the upper story.

And all to grief sexual acts with obese old Lachmi smelling of sweat and raw onions. So, he says that 5 years was glorious, the 5 years that he spends in London and Oxford was glorious compare to the sorted life that he has had for 45 years in India which is life with his obese wife and all the other things. And then the even the row to success that he has achieved in India seems somehow

strange, somehow painted from play because he had do a lot of underhand thing in order to reach that position.

We do not know, we can speculate again. So, he does not have very high opinion of his lengthy period in India and his and he has a lot of high opinion for the brief stay and he does identify himself with the English gentleman. He looks at India through English lenses through British lenses that is quietly of but at some point or the other he actually tries he picks a times, he even brings of scotch.

So, is it a kind of pretention yes he wants to behave as an English gentleman would do for him an English gentleman would be with his times, for him an English gentleman would sip scotch would enjoy his alcohol probably before boarding the train or even when he is on the train. So, he does all these things because he believes that these are the embodiments or the accessories of a typical English gentleman.

So, which is why he is kind of criticizing these things look at the number of times he had read the times. She says so many times he read the times whether they he despite that he picks it up because he thinks that will attractive attention of the English gentleman who in his perspective or assessing the terms times okay mam I think that Lachmi is a foil to Mohan do you agree with this.

Yeah she is yeah absolutely she is a complete foil to sir Mohan if you look at even physically how is she physically, she is he mentions that she is obese yeah and like she is somehow or the other she appears to be very like dirty, she is wearing a dirty white saree, yes and she sewing beetle leaves and at the end also it is that thing from the train there is a yeah the (()) (10:08) from the train .

It is all not at a proper ethics to you know to follow in public especially. So, she is completely an holds a in his perspective is not it and how is she in contrast he is perfect almost with aroma about him with suits and you know he is never in a hurry, he is always very sedate, he works in an measured manner and there is a phrase he says he walks in a steady gate.

It is actually as he studies how to walk it is a walk that he has practiced. So, all these again reminds me of the phrase that you brought up earlier that he has his retentions right he has lot of retentions and these are some of them you know and on the other hand as we spoke us now Lachmi is the complete opposite right she enjoys the local stimulants the Indian version of stimulants the beetle leafs right.

And even a chapatti that she eats are crumpled chapattis right, nothing is in an order whereas for him everything has to be tickety boo, everything has to be neat in order right and because he thinks that is the English world runs neatly, perfectly in order whereas it is chaos on the other side of it right Khuswant Singh makes use of a third person narrator in karma but his description of an Indian setting or Indians in general appears to be seen through the eyes of a foreigner.

So, do you think that it is a stereotypical representation of Indians in the story through a third person narrator okay. So, we do have a third person narrator in this story, so a third person narrator is a person who has complete knowledge of the world that he is describing that he or she is describing and this third person narration is from a person who does not participate in this story as well okay.

So, this third person knows about the consciousness of sir Mohan, so the stereotyping that we receive about India are the stereotypes that Mohan has about India. So and that stereotype is something that he is borrowed from the apparent consciousness of the English gentleman. So, if he sees India as he thinks the Englishman would see India that could be the case or that need not be the case but he believes that is the perspective of an Englishman.

And he follows that particular perspective and this third person narrator also knows about Lachmi and he describes a bangles you know the diamond, nose ring and her desires to enjoy gossip and all these other things. So, third person is not prejudices but he gives us the prejudices of the central character. So, we need to look at that way okay mam.

For me Lachmi appears to be a very mission women who follows her husband despite him ignoring her. So, can we say that there is a coloniser, colonization that exist between Mohan and Lachmi. It is a very good question yeah that parallel is significant I will come to that in a minute but let us go back to that you know the idea of they are travelling together within quotation marks.

They are not literally railing together in some sense I am also surprised by this you know fact that sir Mohan breeze her alone. He does not like her company at all right, so if you look at their domestic arrangement how is it, how is the domestic arrangement it says that she is only upper part of the house and he will just pay some night visits nocturnal visits, yes in cart to her room.

And it is just a kind of what shall I say functional yeah functional relationship that exist during them yeah absolutely. So, they are physically distance from one another right. Despite all these distancing it is very interesting that he brings her along so, that is a very that makes is wonder why does he drive long in his tours and travels.

So, that is a very interesting thing and for the purposes of the narrator it just shows how in sensitive he can be to his wife. So, the same you know logic that he has in dealing with his wife at home, he practices even then he is outside in the public places that he is in. So, that coloniser colonised attitude is again a very interesting metaphor and Lachmi if we go back to the context of the story.

The socio-historical context of the story, this is pre-independence India that the story is in, set in right. So, in those periods of relationship between husband and wife is usually seen as a master subject sort of relationship generally. And she is passively accepts that hierarchical relationship of course and because of the socio-cultural and political context of the day when has been colonised and the British is at it is height.

We can kind of extrapolate from this and say that you know the nation can be seen as the female in some sense with the you know the male being the masters was suppressing the colonisers who

are suppressing this particular nation. So, that coloniser, colonise relationship can be interpreted in several levels but there is a passion of the female there.

And she is been referred to as master-master yeah exactly the literal term is used there, the master term is used there. And again it can play a dual role 1 is the husband and seen as the master and husband can also be seen as the kind of the coloniser figure who is you know ruling over this nation which is usually seen as a female landscape right. Mam one of the remarkable aspects about narration of karma according to me is there importance given to the minute actions of the character okay.

So, how do you analyse the use of this actions like does they contribute to the better understanding of the story okay. So, what are the minute order, specifics that you are interested in what are the interesting specifics that we get from this story like everything in general like she is we have Lachmi sitting on a great trunk, she is sewing beetle leaves.

And she is speaking loudly to the coolie on one hand, on the other hand we have more than sitting comfortably in a cane chair taking out times. So, look it is like we will get a feeling that we are just watching them in front of us yeah and they do actually carry a lot of weight because as I mentioned earlier it will help us to picture Lachmi as a foil to Mohan.

So, how do you analyse these representations absolutely the point that I really like about your thoughts here is the vivid manner in which the story world is brought life before us. They can chat and Lachmi sitting on the trunk which the coolie has put down you know and the other thing that I want to add to your list is that the money the she gives the coolie you know she takes a bit.

And her bit from the you know the from the saree end and then gives it to the coolie that is the only one reference to money passing from a superior to an inferior right. And Lachmi is the one who offers the money you know she pays the coolie who has offered service to her and we do not see Mohan doing that you know. So, whatever reason and that is a very very moment it is a touching moment.

Because she returns there is gesture of paying thanks in kind there you know and there is also a lot of egalitarian relationship between Lachmi and those who are around her you know she has a proper normal relationship conversation with coolies she enjoys as troll you know she eats in public all these details which kind of tell to how these how down to earth that she is you know.

She is part of the fabric of India whereas he has a top down approach you know he asks and then somebody comes running and then offers you know the drink and somebody carries the stuff and puts him to the compartment for him. And he does not return times or there is no thank you there you know in some way or the other. So, it is a superior inferior relationship that he has with a country whereas she seems to be on a level playing ground with those who around her.

So, again the power dynamics becomes clear to us okay does this story actually stress the importance of sticking onto once natural incidence because I think Lachmi who behaves very naturally is rewarded at the end whereas Mohan actually acts or pretends to be an Englishman is actually he is the one who is left out yeah it is a good question.

And a complex question as well because this phrase natural instincts is again complicated because what are the several natural instincts that are there in the story 1 is gender male, female gender she is sticks to the Zenana she is safe right . She is sticks to social status she is safe, she is very submissive, she is very passive she is not a social climber and like her husband who is the social climber.

He comes from a family which is probably illiterate right because Lachmi's relatives are all illiterate as well. So, relationships are made between equal families in those days right or thus the general attitude. So, perhaps he could have risen from rags to riches. He could have risen from a very humbled beginnings and could have reach greater heights, he becomes a visor and barrister high official, he go he probably he won a scholarship.

We do not know probably he study out of somebody else's generosity and he made it big and he comes back with all those education and misguided notions and if you remember the story he says that he adopted the mannerism. So, the upper classes he does not adopt the mannerisms of

the low classes, middle classes, the upper classes and he kinds puts those class attitudes apply when he comes back.

And which is why he chooses away all the illiterate you know relatives hanging about the house and so there are lot of complexities there. So, that social climbing that he does creates problems in a colonial context thus class you know promotion as well as it is complicated because of rise and colonisation. Because the outside as the foreigners they do not acknowledge his rise.

They still is a crucial under vital aspect of life, so he infringes on the rights, so called rights and privileges of the upper class British society okay. So, his being in the first class compartment is probably because his earliest place, he has on his place as you say he has paid the you know price of that particular ticket he has every right to be there. But he still gets thrown out, these unfair to throw him out right, it is unfair.

So, in that context if we compare the relative security of the wife with the insecurity that he experiences in the brutality that he experiences ultimately even though he somehow deserved it. Because of his attitudes it is also very sad to see him being throw out of that position with he has rightly earned in some respects it is his country, train is running in his country and gets throw out even though he paying for it right paid to be there.

So, it is a complex question okay I understand that mam can you comment on the use of previous dialogues on use of language in karma in general. Can you pick out some of the references to the various dialogues that we have, like we have in speaking in Oxford English to the soldiers which almost like there is a reference then they at for 1 instance they actually doubted whether they should trust their inner created yeah yes.

Then there is a reference of him talking to his friends and his relatives in anglicized Hindustani and he also calls whereas (()) (23:16) let to show his attitude. So, I found these gives such as very interesting yeah quite right. So that Oxford accent misses it is mark as you said he tries that accent on these drunken soldiers and they cannot trust their ears.

Because they are drunk, so they think they mishear him, so they think that how can a native can how can a native speak in such a language with such perfect accent and so that is a failure. Language fails it is effect there. And then we have, so Mohan as you said speak in anglicized Hindustani only certain words right only those necessary words that he speaks to his inferiors.

The servants and his wife you know he kind of clumps together with all these inferior classes and we have those soldiers talk in Hindi right (()) (24:13) you know. So, this is reserve for the jump there is a army forwards and then they show the you know uniform and things like that. So, we have the intrusion of the intrusion on the interference of the local languages in this English language narrative there.

And they have a specific functional purpose they think that he does not understand English and they adopt anglicized Hindustani there and that is very ironical because he adopts the same anglicized Hindustani to his wife and to his inferiors right. So, that is a kind of an irony there , the English soldiers in the story I mean the (()) (24:56) they are bit of a very common names in England.

So, do you think that the writing there is only made use of these names to stress on a universality of their attitude to Indians. That is one way of looking at it very common English names and they stand for the English identity itself a very brutish English identity one that is drunken with power symbolically speaking why we can extrapolate and say that of the English identity, the colonial identity itself which is you know writing rough sort over the natives which will not listen to reason.

And then yeah so that universality of this drunken colonial power is there embedded in the identity of these soldiers. And this and also another version one other the way of looking at it they do not have a sir names we just have Bill and Jim right with probably work in class yeah they probably working are their soldiers. Only the less well-off where back to India to do all these lower level jobs which included being a soldier in the army of the empire.

So, there is also a class apply and if you notice the language keep your ready mouth star, the various speaker is not Oxford English it is very working class accent and right. So, that is also a very interesting class identity that Khuswant Singh gives these to English soldiers who behave nastily to the well educated or doctor educated sir Mohan Lal when sir who was be might by the British administration and government.

And so there are lot of things at play one is the universality we can represent the British empire itself and the other is the they are representative of their class position which is working class which is slightly stupid and which does not listen to reason in some ways in the interactions with the superior they cannot discriminate they are not very discriminative in terms of understanding the context.

The various context at play which is blind they just at bluntly and the man handle and that could be because of either the class position or because they think the natives are too low they medium they given with the respect. So, several things are play here okay mam can we say that karma is a setter on English educated Indians or it is a setter on Indian society as such, it is a setter obviously yes .

Because the English educated native behaves in a condescending precocious way and he is insensitive to the local you know way of life to the people who belong to this earth. And you know he totally disregards the life of India, the colour of India, the flavour of India, everything is beneath his content right here on Indian soils.

So, and after that attitude he gets his reward within quote she he gets punish for that particular attitude that supercilious attitude which ignores you know the life spirit of India itself you know which is very which is about excitement which is about puzzle, which is about you know talking with a lots of people from where is works of life, conversing you them, relating to that.

So, he just gets his components for that and that is one thing and it could be on a larger scale as a tier on this entire generation which gets educated abroad and who fails to recognise the worth. The value of life back home okay yeah it could that too okay mam I found the end of karma to be

very ironical like we have Mohan we expel from his first class compartment whereas here Lachmi travel like a queen in her Zenana.

So, can you comment on the use of irony in the story yeah absolutely. So, he does take his wife in the third class Zenana basically and he does not even make sure whether she is you know properly seated there, he does not go by she just find far away. That is sort of very interesting because she is quite independent you know she can get the help of a coolie you know eat on eat by herself you know walk to the compartment, get into where you know she takes care of herself to purchases all his beetle leaves from a road side vendor.

So, in that recurs she is quite independent and that is very appreciable from a figure in that particular point of time. And then the class position that, he occupies he does not understand the complexities of that particular position. He thinks educated that he is educated he has the money, so he can easily occupy that, he does not understand the problems that are underlined that particular class position in a country that is run by foreigners, that is runs by foreigner.

So, for that ignorance he pays of it, the ignorance of the complexities of the class position is what kind of punishes him at the end of the story. Because things are not black and white, there is no England and India you know that kind of black and white does not there in India is kind of run by the British empire and that will not discriminate between you know Oxford educated natives and natives you know.

So, then everything everybody is the same in some sense mam while women was expelled from this first class compartment, the soldiers actually refer to be an as a nigger yeah I found the use of word nigger to be very significantly. So, can you comment on that yeah so that particular derogatory term is usually use to identify the black races from Africa and they use the term these 2 soldiers, drunk soldiers use the term to call you know an ancient India by that term right.

That again tells you they are not very discriminatory in their understanding of the various races. So, that a native is a black, everybody is all the same level playgrounds, so there the other boss the white race of the superior race at any other you know which is not white is nigger is black.

They again you know look at everybody in that colour and they discriminate them by the same identity.

So, that discrimination be at you know a black Africa you know beat of eastern India that discrimination is to be contempt right. And it is interesting that Khuswant Singh uses the soldiers he is working class soldiers to punish this particular native who is theoretically an inferior right in their understanding of the scheme of things. So, an inferior class is kind of attacking and inferior race we should put all these inferior within quotes there.

So, an inferior classes about in inferior race, these soldiers are suppose to travel only by the second class that is the class they are suppose to travel in the train compartment in that particular historical point of time. But they occupy the first class by force and they think they can do that because of their white identity. So, between a competition between natives and second class white man the second class white man win.

So, that is the battle that we have there mam will you shall but absolutely say where Mohan may expel from his first class compartment actually a parallel to his location for Indians by the British yes absolutely and this throwing out of the train of sir Mohan also reminds me of another figure, the famous figure who gets thrown out of trains can you yes Mahatma Gandhi was again was thrown out of the trains because he was not suppose to occupy the first class compartment , even though he paid for it right.

So, that is what I also see this brutality that sir Mohan suffers in a tragic way too , that is the tragedy brought out by colonisation you know and the native who is not very very clear about his position in the grand scheme of things will be damaged India in some sense by the instruments of empire. So, these soldiers are the instruments of empire right and for them the white race gives them a lot of power.

Even though theoretically they have their own position in the hierarchy, mam and also let to look at another parallel stone in we have India class compartment on one hand and Zenana on the other can we say that they actually stand is a parallel to England and India at that point of time

yeah. It is a good comparison again you know comparing the special difference here and a class difference and comparing Indian identity with the English identity.

And India itself with England yeah it is a good comparison and sir Mohan thinks that he represents the English identity. He thinks he speaks for England, he sees if he is kind of somehow associate with England and Lachmi is the one who is associated with India and the Indian identity. And that is broken that fantastic idea is broken, destroyed, decimated of the end when the soldiers put him place and say okay no you cannot be interloper.

That is what is there they behaviours tells us, they tell him you cannot be a interloper you have to go back to your place in the scheme of things which we had laid out on the Indians are continents. So, he has been taught a lesson in that respect, so there are clarities ideological clarities between classes between nations in the colonial context right.

And even if you look at the first class compartment on the Zenana one is near the engine, the first class compartment is near the engine and the Zenana inter classes are the tail end of the train near the guard right. So, there is a lot of distance between the 2 and it also reminds me of a reddit crippling that poem from 1889 and it says east is east and west is west-west and never shall the train meet.

And that seems to be the case here you know in some respects when races are play when colonisation is at his peak. So, this native tries to kind of you know over the other side but then he is put back in his place and thrown out of the position that he seats to occupy. And the other funny thing is that she seems for help, he asks for help right, he shouts with a guard but the guards never come.

The guards are near the Zenana they cannot come when he needs the help, so it is a very ironical situation that he finds himself in his language does not work. His you know cries for help does not get realised again, so he is totally helpless in that regard okay mam about the topic karma like when you think of the karma when you hear the word for the first time we will think of it in a religious or philosophical terms.

So, how apt is such a term to accurately his trivial story which is said in a social a public space to describe this social reality of India and the pre-independence you know yeah. So, karma is a in some sense it is a very very apt title, so as you said in religious terms karma means you know the actions of your past life well determined your present of your future lives right.

So, if you do back you know bad things will happen to you in the future if you good and your past life the things will happen to you . And within the universe of this particular story the past of sir Mohan lal or his present as well you know where he behaves in such a super serious manner to his servants and to the native folk kind of you know or decides his future which are happens in the end of the story when he gets scold out.

So, he is paying for the mistakes of his present in that future at the end of the story when he is thrown out and his wife as gets outside of the window of the train of the moving train. So, there seems to be a nice you know poetic justice sort of thing happening in the story and he pays for it, he pays for the attitude. But then we should also remember that from the point of view of social culture and historical perspectives.

This is a man who has been invited by the British government, so we can see where his loyalty is are . So, his loyalty is are with British empire, his loyalties are with the English gentlemen and if you remember when he sees the 2 British soldiers and the story he says okay they can occupy only the second class. But if you want to first class I will intercede with the guard, I will speak to the person who comes again.

So, he thinks that he can safe guard the Englishman against the authority, so he always sees him as being on that powerful side the white side. And for that attitude he can his, he gets his conformant he gets his word at the end of when the train is leave him onto platform and he is speechless. He is a man who is knowing for his conversations right and if you wants to sure the conversational ability to the Englishman.

And that is ironical that end which he totally speechless when the times is lying beside him and his wife is you know on that moving train when she is moving ahead and he is left behind is a nice ironic endings for this particular story okay mam that is mam thank you Arya thank you Arya for your questions and I hope you enjoy this conversation as well **“Professor-student conversation ends”** thank you for listening, I will see you in the next session.