



# A Comparative Study Of Khushwant Singh And Stephen Leacock's Short Stories

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**Abstract:** Humor and satire have always served as effective literary tools to critique society, expose human follies, and stimulate reflection without resorting to overt confrontation. This paper presents a comparative study of the humorous satire of two eminent writers: Khushwant Singh, an Indian author renowned for his sharp wit and piercing social critique, and Stephen Leacock, a Canadian humorist celebrated for his gentle irony and comic portrayals of everyday life. Although belonging to distinct cultural, social, and historical contexts, both writers employ satire to illuminate social absurdities and human weaknesses. This study explores their shared use of satire as a universal literary form while also identifying the cultural particularities that distinguish them. By situating their works within larger traditions of humor theory—from Aristophanes to Freud and Bergson—this paper argues that Singh and Leacock represent two complementary models of humorous satire: Singh's biting realism rooted in postcolonial India and Leacock's genial humor reflecting early 20th-century North American middle-class society.

**Keywords:** *Humor, Satire, Khushwant Singh, Stephen Leacock, Comparative Literature, Irony, Society, Postcolonialism, Humor Theory*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a mirror to society, reflecting not only its aspirations but also its flaws. Among the many literary devices available to writers, humor and satire occupy a special place. Humor disarms, entertains, and lightens the mood, while satire sharpens the critical edge of humor, transforming laughter into a form of social commentary. From Aristophanes in ancient Greece to Voltaire in Enlightenment Europe, humor and satire have played a central role in challenging authority, exposing human weakness, and provoking reflection in subtle but powerful ways. This paper focuses on two writers from different corners of the world—Khushwant Singh (1915–2014) and Stephen Leacock (1869–1944)—both of whom excelled in using humor and satire to dissect the world around them. Singh, one of India's most prominent modern writers and journalists, is known for his unflinching realism, irreverence, and humorous depictions of Indian society. Leacock, a Canadian humorist and professor of political economy, was once hailed as the most widely read English-language humorist in the early 20th century. His humor is gentle, nostalgic, and universal, often grounded in the absurdities of middle-class life. The central aim of this study is to undertake a comparative analysis of their humorous satire, highlighting similarities and differences. What makes Singh and Leacock comparable is their shared ability to draw laughter while simultaneously encouraging self-reflection. Yet the cultural and social contexts in which they wrote—postcolonial India for Singh and early industrial Canada for Leacock—shape the texture and targets of their satire in unique ways.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly attention to humor and satire has been longstanding. Classical thinkers such as Aristotle emphasized the role of comedy in correcting vice, while Horace and Juvenal distinguished between gentle and biting satire. Henri Bergson, in *Laughter* (1900), argued that humor arises from the “mechanical encrusted upon the living”—rigid behaviors that expose human absurdity. Sigmund Freud, in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), analyzed humor as a release of repressed desires and tensions. Modern critics such as Northrop Frye identified satire as a mode of irony integral to literary discourse. In Indian literary studies, Khushwant Singh has been discussed primarily for his historical novels (*Train to Pakistan*) and journalistic writings. Critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee have highlighted his irreverent humor and his critique of hypocrisy in Indian society. Singh’s essays, short stories, and journalistic columns often employ satire to expose the contradictions of modern India—corruption, communalism, and social pretensions. In Canadian studies, Stephen Leacock has been considered a founding figure in Canadian humor. According to David Staines, Leacock’s humor reflects a “comic vision of life” that seeks reconciliation rather than confrontation. His *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912) is often hailed as the cornerstone of Canadian literary humor, portraying the fictional town of Mariposa as a microcosm of Canadian life. His humor has been described as “genial satire”—laughing with his characters rather than at them. Comparative studies of Singh and Leacock are rare, if not non-existent. This paper therefore fills a gap by juxtaposing two writers from different continents who use humor to reflect society but in strikingly different tones and purposes.

## III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

### 1. Humor as Social Commentary

Khushwant Singh’s humor is often sharp, earthy, and occasionally irreverent. In essays such as *With Malice Towards One and All* and stories like *The Mark of Vishnu*, Singh ridicules religious dogma, social pretensions, and political corruption. His satire is rooted in a realist portrayal of Indian life—often blunt and unapologetic. Singh employs laughter as a weapon to expose hypocrisies. For instance, in *The Mark of Vishnu*, the blind reverence of a man towards a cobra is mocked, underscoring how superstition can border on the absurd. Leacock’s humor, by contrast, is more genial and universal. In *My Financial Career*, he narrates his disastrous attempt to open a bank account, exposing the intimidating aura of financial institutions

through self-deprecating comedy. Similarly, in *Boarding House Geometry*, he pokes fun at academic jargon and the absurdities of daily life. His humor is not designed to wound but to gently highlight human follies, making the reader laugh without bitterness.

### 2. Cultural Contexts of Satire

Singh’s satire is deeply tied to postcolonial India. Having witnessed Partition, Singh often infused his works with a sense of historical consciousness and cultural critique. He ridiculed the pretensions of the English-speaking elite, the contradictions of Indian politics, and the persistence of communal divisions. His humor is biting because the stakes are high—India’s national identity and future were at issue. Leacock’s satire reflects early 20th-century Canadian society, especially its provincial middle-class life. He often targeted bureaucracy, academic pedantry, and the puffed-up egos of small-town figures. But because Canada lacked the violent upheavals of colonial struggle, his satire remained light-hearted, nostalgic, and often affectionate. Mariposa, though ridiculous, is also lovable.

### 3. Techniques of Humor

Singh employs irony, hyperbole, and directness. He is not afraid of offending sensibilities. His blunt style often carries a moral edge—forcing the reader to confront uncomfortable truths. For example, in his essays, he ridicules the hypocrisy of Indian politicians who preach morality while practicing corruption. Leacock, on the other hand, relies heavily on exaggeration, incongruity, and narrative voice. His self-deprecating persona often becomes the butt of the joke, as in *My Financial Career*. His technique involves building absurd situations to comic proportions while maintaining a tone of innocence.

#### 4. Themes and Targets

Singh: Religion, superstition, politics, corruption, hypocrisy, sexuality, social pretension. Leacock: Bureaucracy, academia, finance, middle-class life, small-town vanity, modern anxieties. Both, however, share a common target: human folly. Singh does so with irreverence; Leacock with indulgence.

#### 5. Impact and Legacy

Singh became India's most widely read journalist, with his humor shaping middle-class discourse. His columns normalized irreverent critique in Indian journalism. Leacock, in his prime, was the most popular English humorist in the world. Though less read today, his works shaped Canadian literary identity and influenced later humorists like Robertson Davies.

### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The comparative study of Singh and Leacock demonstrates that humor and satire are both universal and culturally specific. Universally, both writers affirm Bergson's thesis that laughter exposes rigidity and folly in human behavior. Their works confirm Freud's insight that humor releases social tensions. Both Singh and Leacock encourage readers to laugh at themselves, thereby softening the blow of critique. Culturally, Singh's biting satire reflects a society grappling with modernization, colonial hangovers, and internal contradictions. His humor seeks reform through exposure. Leacock's genial humor reflects a society seeking stability and identity in the face of modernization. His satire consoles as much as it critiques. Together, they show two complementary models of satire: the corrective satire of Singh and the consolatory satire of Leacock. Both are necessary: one to shock society into change, the other to reconcile society with its imperfections.

### V. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE

Humor and satire are not mere entertainment; they are essential modes of cultural reflection. Khushwant Singh and Stephen Leacock, though separated by geography and context, demonstrate the power of humor to shape discourse. Singh represents the sharp, corrective voice of postcolonial critique, while Leacock embodies the genial, reconciliatory voice of middle-class nostalgia. Their juxtaposition enriches our understanding of how humor adapts to cultural needs. Future research may expand this comparative framework to include other humorists—such as R.K. Narayan in India or Mark Twain in America—to further explore how cultural contexts shape humor. The study of humor across cultures can illuminate not only literary traditions but also the shared human condition that laughter reveals.

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