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## Cultural Schizophrenia in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*

Aparna Singh

*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* is a foray into the ideological dichotomy that exists at the heart of colonial subjectivity. Through the contradictory affinities which beset two generations; father and son, Khuswant Singh explores the cultural schizophrenia which characterized colonial and post-colonial India. The desire to be assimilated within the colonizer's frame of reference is embodied by the father Buta Singh, a loyal officer to the British, enjoying his status in the society, and the perks of his officialdom in being a judge. His identity is firmly entrenched in the colonial context which provides him both financial and social succor. The setting of the novel in colonial India facilitates a probing analysis of the schizophrenic nature of the colonial predicament. His son Sher Singh becomes a revolutionary and nurtures the dream to outgrow his father's secured lifestyle. For namesake, he is accepted as a leader of a group of local disbanded terrorists, but he is averse to killing and violence as much as he brags about it.

Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952; trans. 1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961; trans. 1963) offer an account of colonialism in which the psychology of the 'native' is determined by the Manichean dichotomy of the colonial project and, prior to the emergence of the more recent wave of post-colonial theory that focuses on hybridity, several creative writers portrayed a similar mentality. Thus Derek Walcott's play *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967) dramatizes the split between a European and an African consciousness in its protagonist Makak's vision of a White Goddess, who initiates him into an atavistic dream of African chieftainship. This Fanonian view of the double consciousness of the colonial psychology is underpinned by the epigraphs to the two parts of the play, which are taken from Jean-Paul Sartre's Prologue to *The Wretched of the Earth*. In the second, Walcott quotes a passage from Sartre, in which he emphasizes the inescapability of such a double consciousness, with reference to the dual religious codes that shape colonial subjectivity, seeing these forces as leading to an ever-widening split rather than some form of syncretic fusion:

They can't choose; they must have both. Two worlds; that makes two bewitchings: they dance all night and at dawn they crowd into the churches to hear Mass; each day the split widens....The status of 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent (Fanon 1968a: 20; quoted in Walcott 1970: 277) .

The father and the son are pulled apart by two worlds which stem from the deep-seated ambivalence inherent in colonial subjectivities. The colonizer masquerading as the provider demanded unmitigated allegiance from the colonized. Buta Singh (notoriously rhyming with Jute or shoes, metaphorically reminiscent of unquestioning subservience or servility) shows complete cultural indoctrination in the master/slave mould. The next generation, in the likes of Sher Singh inhabit in-between space (to use Bhabha's terminology) which precariously places them in the cultural fault lines leading to calamitous consequences.

Ashis Nandy, in his book *The Intimate Enemy* (1983) adapts Foucault's analysis of power to account for the deleterious consequences of the colonial encounter. Nandy's book builds on an interesting if somewhat contentious, distinction between two chronologically distinct types or genres of colonialism. The first, he argues, was relatively simple-minded in its focus on the physical conquest of territories, whereas the second was more insidious in its commitment to the conquest and occupation of minds, selves, cultures. If the bandit-mode of colonialism was more violent, it was also more, as Nandy insists, transparent in its self interest, greed, and rapacity. By contrast, and somewhat more confusingly, the second was pioneered by the rationalists, modernists and liberals who argued that imperialism was really the messianic harbinger of civilization to the uncivilized world. (Gandhi 1998, p 15). Thus Nandy writes :

This colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities and once and for all. In the process, it helps to generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structures and in minds ( Nandy 1983, p. xi) .

Buta Singh is the colonizer in the making ominously presaging the elite groups which eventually supplant the colonizer in the post-colonial nations. The novel suggestively pits two generations in the same family. The family can be both used as a metaphor for the nation and cast as the antithesis of the nation or a 'private realm', as opposed to the public space of the nation. In the colonial situation this division breaks down as the family becomes both the domain and the symbol of anti-colonial activity precisely because it signals an inner sphere (Loomba 182) . The novel counters the notion of the family as a collective unit; a site of contesting ideologies it becomes a confluence of cultural cross-currents. This crisis of cultural identity results, as Frantz Fanon has argued in a kind of schizophrenic madness. The accumulated insults by the white 'master', the endless negation of his native culture, and the prolonged indoctrination in western culture – all result in an unstable condition for individuals, where their native culture was rejected but a new one was not readily available. The 'mimicry' of the 'Other' (white) culture becomes a way of negotiating with this unstable state of non-identity.

Revolutionary inclinations in Sher Singh are brought under scrutiny when he is sucked into a mire of untoward incidents triggered by the sudden disappearance of a police officer. Charged with murder he is compelled to make choices, between his father and his political allegiances. The choice becomes increasingly difficult as Sher Singh is yet to internalize the violence intrinsic in anti-colonial nationalism. Nationalist consciousness arises as a counter to colonial hegemony.

Sher Singh dreams of harmonizing the contradictory philosophies of his family somehow or the other, without realizing the impossibility of such a happening in real life, i.e., 1942 India:

Britain had to get out of India herself or be kicked out, and Sher Singh would say that to Taylor's face. Could he? What about his father's views? His cousin in service and his hope of finding his name in the next Honours' list? And the unique honour he was getting in the way of an armed police guard outside his house-the sentry who sprang to attention and smacked the butt of his rifle even when Sher Singh passed by with his college friends? Couldn't it somehow happen that these opposite factors could be combined into one harmonious whole? He visualized scenes when his Nationalist and terrorist colleagues honoured him as their beloved leader, where Taylor

read an address of welcome and his father proudly looked on. Such were the dreams with which Sher Singh tried to dope himself. They were based on the non-discovery of one party by the other (38) .

Sher Singh's romantic conjecture envisages wishful thinking and self-deception. He secretly wishes acceptance from both these worlds; his father and his revolutionary friends. The duality that he nurtures gradually gives way to uniqueness of vision, a complete metamorphosis into a radical nationalist notwithstanding the temporary digressions.

He calls a secret meeting of his student friends near the canal bridge outside the city. He hides the arms in his garage to escape the notice of the Government police. He also knows that some of his fellow conspirators might be informers against him and therefore remains quite alert. One day the village headman Lambardarji meets Sher Singh at his home and pretends to be very friendly with him. Sher Singh treats him with buttermilk. The village headman cleverly tries to elicit some information about the Hindu boys who participated in the shooting party a few days ago. Then Sher Singh begins to suspect that the village headman may not be really as innocent as he appears, in spite of his courteous behaviour and fine manners. Suspecting him to be an informant to John Taylor, Sher Singh offers him some money as a gift, though inwardly he knows he has given it to him as 'black money.' He also knows that he may have to give more money to the village headman to keep his secrets concealed by the Government.

The ideological conflict between father and son continues all through the novel. When Buta Singh habitually admires the British people and their impartiality, and suggests that "We Indians have a lot to learn from them," Sher Singh boldly crosses his father and argues that the British "too have something to learn from us ... like hospitality ... tolerance." (32) . Buta Singh pin-points the mutual intolerance among Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims and highlights the so-called impartiality and tolerance of the British people. Sher Singh does not hesitate to show the racial discrimination practiced by the British elsewhere:

You can find examples like that everywhere. Most white people are anti-Semitic. It's not only Hitler who has been putting Jews in gas chambers, the Russians have killed many. Everywhere in Europe and America there is prejudice against them and only because they have better brains and talent than others. We do not have any racial discrimination ( 33 ) .

This reminds of Fanon's project of 'total liberation' which requires the enslaved figure of the colonized to refuse the privilege of recognition to the colonial 'master'. In Fanon's words: 'Colonialism wants everything to come from it. But the dominant psychological feature of the colonized is to withdraw before any invitation of the conquerer's (Fanon 1965, p. 63) . Fanon's image of a resolute colonized subject politely declining the primacy of Europe appears as the masthead to Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* – a polemical critique of Western civilization written in 1909.

Meanwhile, Sher Singh associates himself with the terrorists of Amritsar and begins to indulge in the terroristic activities in the city. He is so much preoccupied with the nationalistic-cum-terroristic activities that he remains blissfully ignorant about the loss of his wife's chastity. In spite of his knowledge about Madan Lal being a notorious womanizer, he fails to know that he has been cuckolded by the latter.

Though Sher Singh hates the British rule and the British officers, he is persuaded by his father to meet the District Commissioner Mr. John Taylor to develop some familiarity with him and consequently to change his attitude towards him. Buta Singh expresses his pure admiration for the British people:

As I was saying, these Englishmen take a lot of interest in other people, and it is not just curiosity, it is a genuine concern with their problems. Now Taylor knows all of you by name, what you are doing, how you have fared in your examinations everything. He has an excellent memory ( 37 ) .

Far from being impressed by his father's Anglophilia, Sher Singh offers his severe comment on the Englishmen,

They have learnt from Americans. . . . They have reduced human relationships to a set of rules. They say you must know the name of the person you are talking to and use it as often as possible. You must know his or her interest and talk about them and never of your own. They write down whatever they have discussed with anyone in their diaries and refresh their memories before the next meeting. It does not mean much because their real desire is to create a good impression about themselves. They are not one bit concerned with the affairs of the person they happen to be talking to ( 37 ) .

What elicits such trenchant remarks is the inherent dichotomy between appearance and reality that characterizes British behavior. In Sher Singh we find a categorical disavowal of cultural colonialism. The British thoughtfulness is pretentious which for Sher Singh likens them with their American counterparts in the West.

In spite of Sher Singh's strong dislike for the Englishmen, he yields to parental persuasion and wifely order and meets John Taylor by way of courtesy. But when he meets John Taylor much against his willingness, he feels angry with himself. Although Taylor treats him with courtesy and advises him to relax in the summer holidays at Simla and even offers him permission to own a rifle, Sher Singh feels confused between the contradictory feelings; respecting the authority of the District Commissioner on the one hand and his hatred for the British rule on the other. Similarly he feels confused between his fear of the empty cartridges fingered by John Taylor and his eagerness to drive out the British from India. He feels a sense of humiliation at having agreed to meet John Taylor and a sense of anger at his parents and wife for having pressurized him to meet the officer. He, therefore, returns home with a decision never to repeat such a compromising act. Ironically, Madan Lal, although a nationalist, exhibits similar double standards.

The indigenous acculturation which defines the social spaces of colonial contact can be best exemplified by Buta Singh. His son on the other hand is torn apart by conflicting loyalties. The self-hatred that he suffers strengthens his nationalistic fervor and revolutionary resolve. Sher Singh's mother Sabhrai does not like his being cross with his father and asks him, "Tell me, son, what will you get if the English leave this country?" (34) . Then Sher Singh replies that the country will be free. He waxes lyrical and hopes that "Spring will come to our barren land once more . . . once more the nightingales will sing." (35) . The song of nightingales thus becomes a symbol of freedom and joy for Sher Singh.

## II

The absence of women in the public sphere remains conspicuous in the text, Sabhrai however, is the spiritual anchor through her religious moorings. It is her strong faith that ultimately salvages her family's destiny. As national emblems, women are usually cast as mothers or wives, and are called upon to literally and figuratively reproduce the nation. Sabhrai divided between her husband and her son ultimately sacrifices her life for her son's wellbeing; the son represents the spirit of decolonized India. She is the sanctified image of 'mother nation' who can facilitate her son's fight for freedom in a meaningful way. In spite of the limited domestic territory accorded her she is able to transcend her role as a mere embodiment of love and care. By instilling a sense of confidence in Sher Singh she adopts the role of a mentor and is functional in making him place things in the right perspective. She narrativises the founding concerns of anti-colonial nationalism by foregrounding the social/collective above the self. Sabhrai's role as a mother approximates the role of the film actress Nargis in *Mother India* (a popular 1957 movie which showcases the role of a mother who has the strength to kill her own son in order to redeem social equanimity) with the intrinsic strength to overcome her personal inhibitions and translate the ideologies of the private sphere into a socially relevant world view.

The members of Buta Singh's family grow closer to those of Wazir Chand's family. Buta Singh's daughter Beena and daughter-in-law Champak join Wazir Chand's son Madan Lal and daughter Sita and all go to Simla to spend some time in summer. The ideological similarity between Sher Singh and Madan Lal has, obviously, brought the two families closer. Madan Lal, in spite of being a nationalist, is an unfailing seducer of women. On account of his physical handsomeness, sophisticated manners and abundant chivalry, he succeeds in tempting and finally seducing Champak, thereby creating sexual jealousy between Beena and Champak. Even when Sabhrai joins them in Simla to prevent the possible damage to Beena's virginity or Champak's chastity, she is very cleverly fooled by Madan Lal who shows her extraordinary respect and courtesy and silences her suspicion about the violation of the family's sexual morals.

Madan Lal although a revolutionary, glibly embodies the loose moral standards of a nation in transition. His sexual promiscuity symbolizes the inevitable paradigm shifts which a nation-in-making encounters. He may not be suffering from a split consciousness as his anti-colonial inclinations are well defined but the ease with which he shuttles between Sher Singh's wife and sister shows his own fragmented personality. The disregard for the female is an audacious deviation from the divine construction of women in national anti-colonial fantasies.

Under colonial rule, the image of nation or culture as mother worked to evoke both female power and female helplessness. The nation as mother protected her son from colonial ravages, but was herself ravaged by colonialism and in need of his protection. Although the ideal woman here is constructed in opposition to the spectre of the *memsahib*, the images fuse together older brahminical notions of female self-sacrifice and devotion with the Victorian ideal of the enlightened mother, devoted exclusively to the domestic sphere (Loomba 183). *I Shall not Hear the Nightingale* shows the variegated facets of the feminine through the paradoxical constructions of Sabhrai and the two women from the next generation; Beena and Champak.

Although Sher Singh and Madan Lal share ideological affinities they represent conflicting responses to the idea of the feminine (considered integral to the concept of nationalism).

It is not only through individuals like Sher Singh that we are made aware of the ideological rift that colonialism induced, the very idea of nationalism itself was not conceptually homogeneous. Madan Lal with his slippery morals and a general disregard for women denounces the very rubrics of nationalism constructed around the feminine. He openly flaunts his sexual prowess to seduce two women from the same family brazenly defying the codes of conduct befitting a nationalist. The death of Sabhrai in the end reinforces the image of the self-sacrificing mother (redeeming womanhood) which can save a nation/son in distress. Champak the transgressing wife shows the about face of the venerated woman who can forego her chastity to fulfill her carnal desires. The women amply project the double consciousness inveigling the colonized nation. The women as sole custodians of the so called immaculate nationalistic feelings are interrogated through characters like Beena and Champa.

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