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Representation of Conflicting Ideals in Khushwant Singh's *I Shall not Hear the Nightingale Again*

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Abstract:

Khushwant Singh's *I Shall not Hear the Nightingale Again* presents the author's view of the impact of the Indian freedom movement on the lives of the people but neither does he eulogise the valiant freedom fighters nor has much interest been shown on the impact of the great leaders on the revolutionaries. Singh's focus seems to be on two classes: one whose nationalistic fervor vanishes with the slightest of hardships and the class for which the prime motive is to live a life of self-aggrandisement without being bothered about issues of colonization and freedom from imperial rule with a lady attempting to make ends meet at the centre of the complex chain of incidents. The novel presents a fresh angle of looking at the historical event and the researchers seek to study the representation of conflicting ideals/ ideologies that characterise the plot. The novelist is known for his innovative treatment of his subject matter and its presentation and the paper shall make an analytical study of the dynamics of his manner of representation while treating such a historically significant event.

Keywords: ideology, colonization, nationalism, otherisation

The Indian freedom struggle is one extensively fictionalized event in Indian literature. Considering its position in the annals of world history and space provided to it in the texts discussed at different levels of the Indian education system it is obvious that there has been efforts at glorifying the event and those associated with the exercise. However discussions on the event usually have a homogenizing tendency wherein the individuality of a self becomes secondary to the collective identity of those fighting for the cause. Certain historians associate the personal with the public, thereby pushing the individual to the backdrop and soon he becomes an insignificant figure or even if he dazzles for a brief period of time, soon fades into insignificance.

Khushwant Singh's *I Shall not Hear the Nightingale Again* is set in pre-independent India – during the years when the intensity of the Quit India Movement was at its peak and the entire nation was standing together for a greater cause. The novel traces the story of a family divided on ideological lines. Buta Singh is a senior magistrate of the imperial administration while his son Sher Singh is a nationalist. With political ideology opposed to that of his father, he asserts with force:

There should be a baptism in blood. We have had enough of target practice. (Singh 1)

For the Sher Singh's group of revolutionaries the ouster of the British is the only concern. The depth of their hatred for the Indo-British relationship can be figured out from Sher Singh's conversation with his comrades. They can barely take their discussion ahead without the use of words like *blood*, *kill* and *bullets*:

We should sprinkle blood on our guns and say a short prayer to baptize them. Then they will never miss their mark and we can kill as many Englishmen as we like. (Singh 1)

He further speaks:

Brother, it is an old Hindu custom to baptize weapons before using them. Our ancient warrior used to dip their swords in a tray of goat's blood and lay them before Durga, Kali or Bhavani or whatever name the goddess of destruction was known by. We should keep up the tradition. (Singh 2)

General Dyer is a symbol of mindless atrocity and unparalleled villainy for Indians. Any study of British atrocity on Indians is incomplete without his reference. Sher Singh and his group also harbor a deep rooted sense of hatred towards him and they take psychological solace of having insulted him by naming a dog with the general's surname. The dog Dyer thus becomes representative of what the motley group of revolutionaries want to achieve : make the imperial masters lick their boots. If Buta Singh is a representative figure of Indians lending service for smooth propagation of foreign rule, Mr. Taylor stands for the British control which has permeated or made inroads even into the remote corners of the country. The novel can be said to be a clash of two sets of values. Subhash Chandra in his essay *I Shall not Hear the Nightingale Again: A Re-evaluation* has commented thus on the presence of contradictory trends and thoughts in the novel:

At the deeper level, the book turns into a clash between and evaluation of two sets of values, two ways of life: conventional, non-violent, staunch faith in religion and God and pure, ascetic, unostentatious but dignified and moral life on one hand and the modern, sexually promiscuous, morally loose, hypocritical, opportunistic and violent ways on the other. This juxtaposition of the two modes of life — the old and the modern — is comparable with Aldous Huxley's *The Brave New World* in which the author pours fun on the ultra modern values through the savage. (Chandra 164)

Khushwant Singh however is not venomously satiric. His presentation is of a family that can be taken as a representative of many other families of pre-partition India. Even in today's world, such divisions on political ideology or on ethical grounds can be widely witnessed. Singh tries to be honest in his representation and his intention is to show the readers how such a state of affairs can make its impact felt in diverse different ways.

A post-colonial reading of *I Shall not Hear the Nightingale Again* opens up avenue for an analysis of the process of creating the 'other' which is more of a psychological creation and hence relative rather than being something absolute. In the novel every character appears to be the 'other' in a situation from one point of view or another. If the revolutionaries are the 'other' voice from the perspective of the rulers; the British are considered to be the 'other' in the Indian psycho-social fabric who have been successful in expanding their empire to a region with which they have never shared any socio-cultural traits. The marginalized 'others' – the Indians in this context- are unable to show the same demeaning eye to the group that determine the parameters and dynamics of otherization. They carry an air of supremacy around them and it is such a state of mind that people like Sher Singh seems to challenge. Edward Said, in his *Introduction to Orientalism*, has said:

...and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness, usually overriding the possibility that a more independent, or more skeptical, thinker might have had different views on the matter. (Said 73)

The characters of the novel represent the conflict of interests and ideals that forms the core issue of the novel. Champak is representative of a physically dissatisfied Indian wife whose husband is too pre-occupied with thoughts of the motherland to think of his family. Her significance never takes the front stage in his world of thoughts and is thus forced to seek bodily pleasure outside the threshold of their otherwise highly 'moral' household. If Sher Singh complains that the imperial masters have been indifferent to the natives, so is he at the familial level. Sabhrai is caught in the vortex of and unable to decide which side to take. She suffers immensely and dies an untimely and pathetic death. Her isolation and mental dilemma is the fate of a large majority of Indian women whose identity is dictated by her husband's name and later on by her son's. Without having a concrete view of her own she grapples hopelessly between two ends – Buta Singh on one hand and Sher Singh on the other, with both trying to make her accept their respective lines of thought. She, in such a web of circumstances, assume the image of being a representative figure of Indian women but all Indians in their inability to decide between the so-called or 'showed' excesses of the British government and the rosy view of India's future as painted by those fighting for independence. Without everyone in the family busy in their own world she becomes the 'other' and fails to come out of the quagmire. For her, the world is what appears through the eyes of her husband and son. Indira Bhatt in her essay *The*

Fetters are Fallen: A Study of Sabhrai in I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale has spoken thus about Sabhrai:

Sabhrai's life is simplicity itself. Here is a life devoted to her family, looking after the needs and comforts of every member. She finds her own comfort in her worship of her God and Guru and the reading of the Granth, the holy book every day. (Bhatt 69)

Sabhrai's identity is thus merged with that of her family which runs on the line dictated by her husband and to some extent on the whims of her son. A lost Sabhrai changes her opinions with time as she gets into dilemma as to which of the opinions represented by the male voices of her family to choose from. Her subdued voice makes her representative of the sub-altern in the novel – if her son is a sub-altern on political lines, she has been rendered a sub-altern on the basis of gender. Her inner trauma and sufferings can be stated beautifully in the concept of female subordination put forward by Simone de Beauvoir. Fiona Tolan, after Beauvoir, has stated:

Asking why women have allowed men to subordinate them (existentialist philosophy emphasizes self-determination) brought de Beauvoir back to the body and motherhood. Excluded from the public sphere, women fail to form the alliances made by men in war and government and business, and form instead make female bonds that destroy the potential female group identity that could position man as the other to women's self. (Tolan 321)

Sabhrai however does not remain the same quiet women throughout the novel. We see her taking responsibilities when her son is accused of and arrested for the murder of Jhimma Singh and her husband expresses his inability to control the tide of events and states his helplessness at the sudden occurrence of such a situation:

The responsibility fell automatically on Sabhrai. She accepted it readily, not because she had any advice to give her son on the statement he was to make, but because her heart ached to see her son and to clasp him to her bosom. She asked her to tell her what she was to say to Sher Singh about the confession. (Singh 222-3)

Sabhrai gathers the courage to go ahead and meet her dear son but her discourse is one dictated by her husband's words. In other words, she has not yet succeeded in coming out of the web of the patriarchal set-up. Her inquisitiveness can be contrasted against the material concerns of her husband who is her guide, her mentor even in issues where she feels certain disparity of thoughts deep inside her. Buta Singh's statements single him out as a man who is a father next and magistrate first. Indeed, he has to be praised for his loyalty to the government and this is what creates an unavoidable and severe tumult in his mind:

Buta Singh refused to comply. He thought that, in the circumstances, the refusal to obey Taylor would more than ever prove his loyalty to the Government and disapproval of his disloyal son. (Singh 222)

As for as I am concerned, my service, pension, and the land granted by the Government all go. But this is a small matter; in addition, the boy will be hanged. (Singh 223)

If Buta Singh is a father who is unable to decide whether to take side of his son or remain a dedicated employee of the imperial government, Sher Singh is not a true patriot with resolute thoughts from any dimension. His professed 'baptism in blood' is hollow as can be seen from his reaction while being in captivity. He could not bear the cries of his fellow revolutionaries and when his mother asks him whether he is afraid of the situation he has been trapped into, he says:

Who is not afraid of a beating? Only those who get it know. It is easy to be brave at the expense of other people. (Singh 233)

Sabhrai's devotion to the Lord and concern for her son are exemplary. Shrouded in a mist of affected loyalty and sophistication, Buta Singh searches for a way out of the complex situation but his wife gathers courage to write a letter to Mrs. Taylor requesting her to look sympathetically at Sher Singh and exonerate him of the charges:

Dear Taylor Memsahib, I am an uneducated Punjabi woman who cannot write nice words of thanks in English. Ask any one of your clerks to read this to you. God bless you for what you have done You wanted to share the grief of a mother whose child has been stricken. There is no greater kindness in the world... May God ever keep your household full of plenty and keep sorrow and suffering away from your door. (Singh 235)

Indira Bhatt in her analysis of the novel opines that it is not Sher Singh and his group of professed or 'baptized' revolutionaries who are freedom fighter but ironically it is Sabhrai who is the real freedom fighter. Bhatt opines:

Though she loves her son, she is willing to sacrifice him if he so decides, she does not impose her will on either her husband or her son. But she has made the harsh choice. Knowing the temperament of both her husband and her son she realizes Sher Singh's choice. After doing her duty according to her understanding of her Guru and the Granth, she has left no will to live. She takes to bed and is seriously ill. Ironically it is Mrs. Taylor who realizes this and urged her husband to free Sher Singh. (Bhatt 71)

The inherent innocence and kindness of Sabhrai have been juxtaposed against the hypocrisy of Sher Singh. Instead of being ashamed for being thus released, he takes the opportunity to show himself as a freedom fighter who has been to jail for the sake of his people. The procession after his release is utilized to add a feather to his cap, of being a leader of substance. Buta Singh too gets ecstatic after being included in the Honours list but he too remains oblivious of the acts of Sabhrai removed from the limelight that secured their status. Her tragedy is that she is not identified in individualistic terms but either as the wife of an efficient officer of the British administration or as a pious lady devoted to her family: she is either a wife or a mother. Yet she comes out of that shroud and we witness her endowed with qualities lacking in the men of her family. It is really ironical that Sher Singh talks of dignity and yet when entrapped in harsh circumstances, leaves aside all traces of a dignified living. Hayden Moore Williams also shares high opinions on the astute qualities of Sabhrai. He upholds her as a symbol

of order and strength. In his essay entitled *The Doomed Hero in the Fiction of Khushwant Singh and Manohar Malgaonkar* he says:

... there is heroism in this novel – the heroism of Sher Singh’s mother who emerges in strong lines at the end of the book. Yet ironically she does not live to hear the nightingale of Indian freedom. She dies in the middle of the celebration of the British honour conferred on Buta Singh for loyal service to the Raj. (Williams 192)

In the assessment of Indira Nityanandam, Sher Singh and Buta Singh are the two facets of the colonized. The myth of the ‘whiteman’s burden’ is so deeply permeated in the psyche of Buta Singh that he takes every opportunity to glorify his association with the British crown. Glorifying Hitler, he says that only men like him can shape the destiny of a nation. Sher Singh on the other hand cites examples from Indian history like Sivaji, Rana Pratap and Guru Govind Singh. The voice of Sher Singh is the voice of the sub-altern which is often harshly mutilated by the dominant voices. Such a consciousness or the kind of comparisons made under the impact of such a consciousness leads to a sense of inferiority being automatically attached to anything that belongs to the colonized. Ashis Nandy states:

This colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces with colonized societies to alter cultural priorities 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 11)

The politics of the colonised is often marked by certain regulation framed to make the ‘other’ feel that he is at the mercy of a superior power. Mr. Taylor’s statement that if Sher Singh falls in the lien, then he could be provided royal pardon is an example in this regard. Though Sher Singh’s voice gets feeble as the novel advances yet it can be said that he attempted to turn the tide at least for a moment and strengthen what Partha Chatterjee has termed ‘the politics of the governed’:

Civil Society, for instance, will appear as the closed association of modern elite groups, sequestered from the wider popular life of the communities, walled up within enclaves of civic freedom and rational law... talking about the rulers and the ruled, I will invite you to think of those who govern and those who are governed. Governance ... is ... the body of knowledge and set of techniques used by, or on behalf of, those who govern. Democracy today, I will insist, is not government of, by and for the people. Rather, it should be seen as the politics of the governed. (Chatterjee 4)

For Indira Nityanandam, Sher Singh stands for the typical post-colonial tendency of questioning the coloniser and at the same instance also express the deep rooted anguish of the revolutionaries at the plight of the colonized natives.

The father-son duo is stuck to the idea of a glorious past. Whereas the father glorifies his deeds and the good work done for the empire by his forefathers, the son reverts back to the days

of the mythical nightingale singing in gay abundance. Sher Singh's inability to be a successful revolutionary can be ascribed to his failure to imagine what might come up in the days after the end of the colonial rule. He lacks a leader's acumen and farsightedness. Sabhrai, on the other hand, looks at the future. Instead of thinking blissfully about the past she harps for the future. The nightingale is a device to retrieve the past for Sher Singh but for his mother it is a symbol of hope for a glorious future.

I Shall not Hear the Nightingale Again can be analysed from different critical perspectives but the tussle between imperialism and nationalism in all its shades dominates the novel. The individual lives are in one way or the other related to the predominant tussle though that comes at a price. Every character is shown repressing their desires to enable their ideas to fit into the dominant discourse inside their own circles or that of the society at large. Buta Singh and Sher Singh spread a shroud of righteousness, selflessness and magnanimity around their petty ambitions and opposed to all those is Sabhrai who throws away all falsities to spread the message of love and sacrifice without any fear or concerns of favour. She becomes symbolic of the nightingale singing away the gloom announcing the advent of daybreak.

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