

Freedom Struggle in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*

Dr. Dastgir Alam

Asst. Prof. of English

M.L.S. College, Sarisab-Pahi,

Madhubani-847424

(L.N.Mithila University Darbhanga).

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Abstract:

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale is symbolical, justified and appropriate as the entire novel is a portrait gallery of the pious and religious personality of Sabhrai. 'I' in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* is significant and also meaningful. It is important and most relevant to any assessment of the novel of the critics. As Sabhrai is the embodiment of human and moral values, Khushwant Singh tries to portray her by giving this suitable title. 'I' is indicative of Sabhrai after death and the title clearly refers to her. As the independence struggle is moving ahead in a feverous pitch all over the country, Sher notices that Punjab is still sleepy, and somewhat protected from the harsh natures of reality. His urge to do something towards the struggle leads to a police informer go missing, and Sher is suspected of the murder. Sher is offered pardon if he discloses the name of his cohorts, or he is threatened to be hanged by the British. Khushwant Singh handles the emotional dilemmas of his characters, and how they react differently to the same circumstances. The taut narration keeps us guessing till the end of the novel, and Sabhrai's character is a revelation at the end.

Keywords: Symbolical, religious personality, independence, harsh nature, struggle and emotional dilemmas.

Khushwant Singh is one of Indian's distinguished men of letters with an international reputation. A brief account of his achievement as a novelist, short-story writer, historian, essayist, sketchiest, journalist and editor are sufficient to establish him in Indian writing in English as a versatile genius. Till date he has produced two novels, a considerable number of short stories, an authentic history of the Sikhs, biographies of Sikh leaders and many articles which reveal his thought and feeling of a great writer. His presentation of the real and comic

makes him stand as a pillar and peer among modern Indian writers on subjects of concern to contemporary man.

As a short story writer Mr. Singh follows and practices the art of the short story in its early 20th century mould and narrative form. His stories show a distinct narrative structure and a traditional development of the plot. The action and episode dominate the stories. The plot is based on the conflict of crises in character and situation. The development of action is sequential. It is marked by progression in time rather than in space. The action unfolds in a series of complications to create suspense and curiosity. A conflict in situation and character is created, developed and resolved through a succession of scenes and the resolution brings out the point of the story. It is sometimes surprising, unexpected sometimes and sometimes revealing. The development is linear and the design geometrical, but the lines move to find the ultimate point of resolution.

With the publication of his first novel *Train to Pakistan*, Khushwant Singh arrived on the contemporary literary scene. It was first called entitled *Mano Majra*. This brought his recognition and wide acclaim. This won for him the Grove Press India Fiction Prize for the year 1956. It is very interesting to note that Khushwant Singh did not become a full-time writer by choice; he had no such intention. The decision to write came to him when he found something compelling to write about. *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* is the second novel by Khushwant Singh. It has basic structure of social and political narrative. It is essentially a social and human document, a story of two families one Sikh and the other Hindu. It covers the period from April, 1942 to April 1943. Its range is limited and the canvas restricted, the form and structure are both conventional and traditional. The mode of presentation, plot, construction, characterization, setting, situation and climax are entirely conventional.

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale has brought qualified praise to Khushwant Singh for its fictional presentation. This novel offers insights into the life and customs of the Sikhs in India. It presents a drama of family loyalties which can be enjoyed by any western readers with even little knowledge of India. It is a chronicle with bold realistic portraiture. In spite of one-dimensional characters, it is very interesting for its plot, climax and piled up sex. The picture of the Punjab land and the Sikh people with easy style adds to its charm and beauty.

The first chapter begins with a meaningful reference to the baptism in blood. This shows a sharp contrast to the atmosphere indicative of the title. We see Sher Singh and his friends engaged in a target practice and rifle shooting in a rural area in the Punjab. It appears a preparatory practice to initiate revolutionary zeal at driving out the British through terrorist activities. A group of immature college students wanted to perform 'baptism in blood' similar to the ancient Hindu custom of dipping swords in an animal's blood and putting it before Goddess Durga or Kali.

Madan Lal, the son of Wazir Chand, supports their plan of killing either a deer or a duck. The boys march ahead and see a sarus crane followed by its mate. Sher Singh is not willing to shoot the crane as he thinks that if one of a pair is killed, the other dies of grief. Madan pokes his weak nerves and Sher Singh accepts the challenge. He pulls the trigger and the bullet hits its mark. A cloud of feathers fly in the air and the bird falls in the mud. Sher Singh is torn between a sense of remorse and a feeling of pride for accuracy of his shooting. He walks to the wounded bird and puts his right foot upon its neck. He again shoots it with a revolver, the crane dies. He tries to kill the mate also but fails to do so. The mate cries in pain and the novelist writes: 'the anguished cry of the flying crane was almost human'.

In his human enthusiasm Sher Singh forgets to pick up six empty cases of bullets. This act of his forgetfulness leads him to the nemesis. He is taken to the village headman, Jhimma Singh. The headman demands license of the boys. Someone tells him that Sher Singh is the son of Buta Singh, the magistrate of the district. Jhimma Singh is suspected to be a police informer, so Sher Singh introduces all the boys under false names. Thus, an unpleasant incident is averted. When the boys are preparing to leave in a jeep, the female crane is seen 'is kept calling all the time' for its partner.

The novelist introduces other family members of Buta Singh. His wife Sabhrai is the binding force in the family. She is deeply religious. *The Granth Sahib* is the source of all knowledge and enlightens for her, though she is not educated. Sabhrai is an extra-ordinary woman having a profound understanding of wife. Sher Singh, her son, is bundle of, vigour, vitality, valour and self interest. He suffers from weak nerves. He wants to be benefited from his father's high position of a senior Magistrate. The novelist points it out:

'He had somehow believed that he would muddle through, getting the best of the two worlds the one of security provided by his fathers who was a senior Magistrate, and the other full of applause that would come to him as the heroic leader of a band terrorist...'¹ (p.15)

The son uses father's jeep for his adventure without his knowledge. Buta Singh is provided this jeep for war efforts by the British government. This jeep is being used by a band of terrorists to undermine this effort. Both father and son have different approaches to life- loyalty to British Raj and power, position and money. His advice to his son shows his double and dubious nature:

'And', added Buta Singh with indulgent

Pride, don't say anything which

May cause trouble. Remember my

Position. I do not mind your hobnobbing

With these Nationalists, as a matter

Of fact, it is good to keep in with

Both sides- but one ought to be

Cautious'.² (p.27)

Buta Singh and Wazir Chand are both are magistrates, but Buta is closer to the Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Taylor. Wazir Chand's family is not very much religious. They had only a large colour print of Lord Krishna. Seta and Beena are friends and both are daughters of the two families and are reading in the same institution. The family is occasionally on visiting terms.

The forces of violence and destruction took to the murder of the village headman Jhimma Singh. It was his fault that he had demanded three hundred rupees from the so-called revolutionaries who had practiced rifle shooting and who had handed over the six empty cartridge cases to the police. The killing of Lambardar Jhimma Singh is the result of pseudo patriotism and the immaturity of Sher Singh and his companions.

Sabhrai is the female spirit who serves as the Savior of all these lost souls. When she receives a telegraphic message from Buta Singh at Simla. She returns home at once. Her serene, religious and moral values are invaded by violence and darkness spread out in his family. Mrs. Taylor receives her on her arrival at the station and wishes her all the best in this depressing hour and crisis in the family. On reaching home she finds everything dark, dismal and disarray, her son Sher in jail, Champak Shaken and forlorn and Buta Singh shocked and sullen.

Sher Singh, who had longed for a glorious political career is lodged in jail on a suspicious charge of murder. The Anglo-Indian police sub-Inspectors hit him hard on his ankles which made him extremely helpless and miserable. He did not expect his father's visit to jail. In the jail he would not decide what to do- confess his own involvement or name his friends for the crime. In both ways he was in danger. The way out was found by Sabhrai, his mother, when he visited his son in jail. She spent the whole winter night in a Gurudwara in search of the word of God:

She found a spot from where
She could see the dome of the temple
And the reflection of the moon and the
Stars in the dark waters of the sacred
Pool... the city was sleep... the boom
Of the tower clock striking the hours
Disturbed the heavy silence...
When she finished her prayer the clock
Struck two. But the tumult in her
Mind was not stilled...³ (p. 202)

Sabhrai questioned herself several times whether she had lost faith in the Guru and become a skeptic. In the meantime, she recalled that she had seen the divine hawk sitting on the golden dome of the temple. She recollected the vision of Guru Govind Singh who had lost his four sons

for fanaticism and religious tolerance. Sabhrai recited the holy verses: Eternal God... the timeless, deathless Lord of Heaven. On finishing her recitation, she found hope and confidence to her anguish heart. Now she decided to see her jailed son. The Taylors provided her official car. The Anglo-Indian inspectors were amazed and the Muslim Inspector treated her like mother. The meeting scene of mother and son presented moving account of human drama, rocked in close embrace with the dog leaping about the cell, yapping and barking joyously.

The feminine principle is absolutely embodied in personality of Sabhrai. She is no less than Bebey Nanki, Bebey Bhani, Mata Gujri and Mata Sundari. She is an example of detachment in attachment, lust and love, renunciation and deathlessness. Her spiritual journey starts from Bibi to Bebey to Mata. She takes up this arduous journey while living in a family of four. In her, there is exploration of feminine facet of Sikh ethos. Her humanistic outlook of life shows her unflinching faith in Sikh religion. Often quoted holy verses add to her sound sense. Thus, Sabhrai follows the path of love through self-denial and sufferings. To her those who would love infinitely and be loved. She occupies a dominant role in the novel and is above all characters as such she is the hero of *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*.

Sher Singh sought his mother's advice in his life and death case. She simply said being 'an illiterate, native woman' she looked for Guru's advice. When Sher asked for those Guru's words, she answered '...my son had done wrong. But if he named the people who were with him, he would be doing a greater wrong. He was no longer to be regarded as a Sikh and I was not to see his face again' Sabhrai blessed him and left.

The Guru's words worked miracle, and the Taylors gave to the Buta Singh family a generous Christmas gift as Sher Singh's release from jail. Since no concrete evidence was found against Sher Singh and he was held on suspicion. The mystic powers of Sabhrai brought victory to Sher Singh. It is the victory of good over evil and forces of violence. It is true that human values and natural justice prevail in the end.

In *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, there is a holyman Peer Sahib, a Muslim divine, but he is not at all holy. He appears to be a bogus holyman. The novelist portrays him a young man of thirty, tall, wiry with a sweet voice. Though he is committed to the vows of celibacy he seduces Shunoo. Shunoo is a fat middle-aged Hindu woman in the household of Buta Singh, the

magistrate. Mundoo, the male servant in the house is annoyed with Shunoo for she behaves like a boss. He pours the strange mixture in her drinking water. This affects her in many ways. She decides to take the help of Peer Sahib for her cure of this mysterious disease. She approaches Peer Sahib because she has no faith in Allopathic or Aurvedic medicine. Peer Sahib first of all calls him her 'daughter'. He thinks her to be an infidel woman 'who might in this way be brought on the right path'. He also believes that his actions do not violate the rules of celibacy. After a mild protest Shunoo appears to have enjoyed herself. The novelist gives a picture of the process of her surrender to the Peer Sahib.

'Here was a man twenty years younger, strong and virile with an untamed lust savagely tearing off the padding of respectability with which she had covered herself. He stirred up the fires of a volcano which had all but become extinct. It was all wrong, but it was deliciously irresistible. It was like an itch which begs to be scratched till it draws blood'.⁴ (p. 141.)

Mr. Singh has mixed up two episodes of illicit sexual relation of Peer Sahib and Shunoo, Madan and Champak. The first relates to peers and the second to the high families of Buta Singh and Wazirchand, both the magistrate in British Raj. Champak, the daughter-in-law, of Buta Singh is tempestuous, abnormal, sex-hungry woman. Her clandestine relation with Madan creates sharp contrast to moral values.

'Champak goes to Simla with Madan, stays in the Gables Hotel. The climax comes in their railway trip from Kalka to home town in a second-class compartment: 'Champak went into the bathroom and took a shower. She came back wearing her transparent Kimono... Madan got up, switched off the lights and came towards her'...⁵ (pp. 149-50). The readers get a view of

Champak in her sleep: 'She lay like a nude model posing for an artist: one hand between her thighs covering her nakedness and the other stretched away to expose her bust'⁶. (p. 18.)

Though unholy alliances are not allowed to be made in the temple of God, in the moments of physical needs Sadhus and Sanyasis break this barrier and they are caught red-handed. Khushwant Singh has exposed this evil so that these temples are not made the centers of sexual pleasure.

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale has a limited canvas. It is restricted because it does not go beyond the range of a social-cum-political narrative of the existing period. Certainly, it has an

element of intense interest and passion for doing something for the nation. In this way the narrative design has historical back-ground and contemporary context. In *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* all the elements of a novel- theme, action, character, setting, pattern, rhythm and prophecy are inter-woven into an organic whole. The modes are indicative of terms like tension, conflict, climax and resolution. The complicated human situation and its implications for the events can be appraised in the light of these devices.

Basically, this novel has the structure of a social and political narratives. It is a social and human document telling the story of two families, one Sikh and the other Hindu. It is set against the end of British colonial rule in the Punjab province. The period is from April 1942 to April, 1943. It is five years before our independence, 15th August, 1947. It does not incorporate upsurge of 1942 or Quit India Movement spear handed by Mahatma Gandhi. It shows anger against British Rule.

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale portrays political situation but lacks immediate interest, involvement and commitment to any political philosophy, hence it is not a political novel. The mode of action also does not substantiate any true political motive. There is a vogue revolutionary attachment of people involved in this freedom movement.

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