



CHARACTERIZATION IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S *I SHALL NOT HEAR THE NIGHTINGALE*

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ABSTRACT

Khushwant Singh is a famous Indo-Anglian writer who occupies an important position in the galaxy of Indian authors in English. Singh regarded his second fictional work, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale¹ as his best novel. It deals with the pre Independent India in 1940s in the background of the Quit India movement. Though set in 1940s it is not a political novel. The novel concentrates and revolves around a Sikh family of Buta Singh, his wife Sabrai, his son Sher Singh, daughter in law Champak and daughter Beena. The novel unfolds in the cheerful and sorrowful incidents in the lives of these characters. This novel deals with the concept of love of a mother towards her family, especially her son. The novel brought fame and also notoriety to Singh as it concentrates on the theme of sensuality through the promiscuous love affairs between Champak and Madan on the one hand Shunnoo and Peersahib on the other.

INTRODUCTION

In the present paper my endeavor is to highlight the characterization in Khushwant Singh's novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. I would like to concentrate on the important characters in the novel through whom the novelist presents the virtuous and vicious nature or the good and evil in human beings. The first character is Buta Singh who is the District Magistrate. He is presented as a supporter of the English people and admirer of the British rule in India:

...loyalty to the Raj had been as much an article of faith with him as it had been with his father and grandfather who had served in the army. He like

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them, had mentioned the English King or Queen in his evening prayer, 'O, Guru, bless our sovereign and bless us their subjects so that we remain contented and happy. (I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale p.23)

Buta Singh is a District Magistrate. He is an admirer of the British rule in India and he serves in the British administration. But, he is a kind of chameleon like Hukum Chand in *Train to Pakistan*,ⁱⁱ and a person who wants to enjoy the privileges of the British as well as being an Indian. Khushwant Singh says:

When he was with the Englishmen, he professed his loyalty to the Raj. He would tell them,

"At my age I cannot change." But when he was amongst his own countrymen he would be a little critical of the English ways. He let his son cast his lot with the Nationalists and did not object to his organizing the students and making political speeches. (I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale p.26)

Buta Singh has a son by name Sher Singh. He is a nationalist and student's union president in the college and is inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Baghat Singh and other nationalists who sacrificed their lives for the sake of their motherland, India. Buta Singh's dual nature can be seen when he indirectly supports Sher Singh and advises him to be a little cautious and careful as he is fighting against the British.

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. (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale p.27*)

On the one hand Buta Singh looks to be an obedient and sincere officer in the British administration, whereas on the other hand he encourages the nationalists as he keeps, nourishes and gives his own jeep and pistol to his son Sher Singh. The intention of Buta Singh like the two edged sword seems to be to enjoy in both ways. If the British continue to rule India he would be in a good and commanding position. If the British quit India his son Sher Singh would become the minister in the cabinet and in that way he would not lose anything in terms of money and position.

Through the portrayal of the character of Buta Singh in particular Khushwant Singh seems to laugh at the selfish attitude attitudes of a number of Indians who supported both the British and Indian governments before Independence for the sake of money and power. Singh goes down very harshly on these kinds of characters.



In *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* apart from Buta Singh there is his son Sher Singh, who is also portrayed as a double minded character like his father:

He had somehow believed that he would muddle through, getting the best of the two worlds: The one of security provided by his father who was a senior magistrate and the other full of applause that would come to him as a heroic leader of a band of terrorists.” (I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale p.14)

There is irony and satire even in the name of Sher Singh. Sher means a lion which is very brave and ferocious but Sher Singh is portrayed as a cowardly, timid and ineffectual person. Firstly, he is so scared when Jimma Singh, the lambardar and a police informer questions and enquires about various things that are related to nationalism. Secondly, when he is hit by the police he cries like a coward contrary to all the great Nationalists like Bhagat Singh, Sukh Dev and Tantiya Tope and many others who were hanged for the sake of freedom. Thirdly, he is ready to reveal all the names of the other nationalists who were responsible for the murder of the village police informer just to save his own life: “He knew that if they used any violence, he would tell all he knew without considering the rights and wrongs of making a confession.” (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* p.197) Fourthly, when he is released from the jail because of the letter and prayers of his mother Sabhrai, he goes out of the prison and accepts the garlands and praises of the nationalists like a hypocrite. Lastly, he is not even capable of satisfying his sex hungry wife Champak. Thus Khushwant Singh makes fun of the pettiness of people using satire as his weapon. It is relevant to note the words of Subhash Chandra who says that:

Singh exposes the innate smallness of most of the people who camouflage their petty desires under righteous idealistic facades. They manage to convince themselves about the genuineness of the purity of their pursuits and the ennobling image it would create for them among their relatives, friends and masses.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is another character by name Madan who is a friend of Sher Singh and the son of Wazir Chand, an officer in the British administration and a friend of Buta Singh. Madan means Lord Krishna who is known as a lover of many women or *Gopikas*. Here in this novel Madan is a student and a friend of Sher Singh who helps him to become the student's union president. He is a handsome young man and a good cricketer. He is a womanizer and indulges in a sensual affair with his friend's wife Champak. He even corrupts the mind of Beena the sister of Sher Singh by taking her to the theatre and brushing against and caressing her breasts. When Sabhrai meets him he behaves as if he is a virtuous and good natured



person. Many critics blame Champak as a sex hungry woman instead of criticizing people like Madan who seduce all kinds of people with their hypocritical nature.

Thus, through the characters of Buta Singh, Sher Singh, and Madan, Khushwant Singh lampoons at the dishonest, stupid, gutless, incompetent, duplicitous and lusty attitudes of the people who conceal their brutal activities under the mask of mysticism and nationalism.

REFERENCES:

ⁱ Singh, Khushwant. *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Bombay: India Book House, 1976.

ⁱⁱ Singh Khushwant. *Train to Pakistan*. Bombay: India Book House, 1976.

ⁱⁱⁱ Subhash Chandra. "I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale: A Re-evaluation". *Khushwant_The Man and the Writer*. R.K.Dhawan Ed. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001p. 164.