



SOCIAL AMBIENCE IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S I SHALL NOT HEAR THE NIGHTINGALE

S. Rajeswari* Dr. S. P. Shanthi**

*PhD, Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, India.

**Assistant Professor, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar, India.

Khushwant Singh ranks among Indian's most distinguished men of letters. He is well-known as an essayist, novelist, short-story writer, historian, journalist, biographer, comedy-writer and editor, attaining an international reputation for his superb writings. He has won numerous literary awards and appreciations. His second novel, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1956) is appreciated for significant portrayal of Sikh life and traditions in the days of pre-independence India.

Khushwant Singh's *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* is the story of two families one Sikh and the other Hindu, set against the last period of British Raj in the Punjab province and just about five years before the achievement of India's independence. Although the novel substantially deals with India's concurrent political situations in Punjab, yet it is not a truly political novel since the politics in it apparently lacks a deep involvement with the situations, interest and commitment to the political motives and even the political philosophy. The novel has limited range and a restricted milieu and it does not go beyond an obvious limit of socio-political narrative interests, though it has substantive elements of intensity and fullness of passion. Khushwant Singh has no apparent political motive. Commenting on Khushwant Singh's style of fictional writing, Phoebe Adams says;

Mr. Singh is a business like writer, not given to frills or subtlety. Even so, the novel is not entirely sober. There are mischievous caricatures, of minor officials..., and a scandalously funny episode in which the family's mistreated boy-of-all-work takes a Rabelaisian revenge. Mr. Singh gives the impression of being an artless and sometimes, a clumsy writer, but his major characters come to life, and their mistakes have the power to make the reader's conscience itch, brutality, unsentimentally observant, and in his bold characterisations he is ready to explore the least appealing aspects of human nature and relationships. (98)

His humour expertly integrated with an essentially sad and cynical story - is wild, broad, unsparing.

Khushwant Singh's fiction reveals that he is a writer who has been deeply affected by catastrophe and that he had relied largely upon the direct, forthright and energetic methods of realism to convey his reactions to experience. The novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* is clearly the work of a sanguine temperament. Circumstances, however, drastically shaped his outlook, for his decision to become a writer is precipitated by the tragic happenings associated with the Partition of India. "It is," said Khushwant Singh in "Interview with Indian Writers," "a period of disillusionment":

The beliefs that I had cherished all my life were shattered. I had believed in the innate goodness of the common man. But the division of India had been accompanied by the most savage massacres known in the history of the country... I had believed that we Indians were peace-loving and non-violent; that we were more concerned with matters of the spirit while the rest of the world is involved in the pursuit of material things. After the experience of the autumn of 1947, I could no longer subscribe to these views. I became... an angry middle-aged man, who wanted to shout his disenchantment with the world... I decided to try my hand at writing.

The attitude here defined indicated that Khushwant Singh is more than an author of violent narratives, that he is concerned, in fact, with important moral issues. The main theme of his fiction involves consideration of the nature of man and the enigma of human destiny through a juxtaposition of violence with a concept of moral order.

In telling the story of partition, both Khushwant Singh tried to re-appraise man and to salvage meaning from inhumanity and moral chaos. Khushwant Singh's disillusionment is part of a wide spread anxiety which led to a reevaluation of Indian idealism. Khushwant Singh's language is as direct, unadorned and uninhibited as the story itself.



In *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Khushwant Singh is again preoccupied by the theme of the antithesis between violence and right moral conduct and the notion that the only redemptive feature of a situation which justifies pessimism, or cynicism, of outlook depends on a single demonstration of personal sacrifice, honesty and moral consistency. The implications of the novel's title are pessimistic. When Sabhrai asks her son, Sher, what India will gain with Independence.

For, although the action of *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* takes place in Amritsar from April 1942 to April 1944 is shaped by the author's retrospective disillusionment. The characterisation of Sher, and his father, Buta Singh - the novel's main symbols of the new India - is so condemnatory of the political upstart and the sycophantic administrator, respectively, that there is no doubt the novel's tone is mainly bitter.

The story opens on a note of violence that recalls the religious fanaticism, the hallucination of moral self-vindication, which caused and excused the Partition atrocities: "There should be a baptism in blood. We have had enough of target practice" (1). Sher and his companions are training themselves to become anti-British terrorists. Sher Singh has never taken life before but as leader must set an example. This results in the ritual murder of a crane, an act brimming with symbolic overtones. To the group the killing signifies their initiation, in the name of Sikh and country, as missionaries of violence. In terms of the novel's meaning, however, the symbolism is ironically barbarous: instead of shooting a bird of prey - the vulture mockingly beyond the range of Sher's gun - he destroys a harmless trusting crane. That this represents wanton abuse of the sanctity of life principle is further amplified by the crane's emblematic characteristics -holiness, filial devotion, prayerful devoutness, martyrdom.

From this act of slaughter the violent chain of events in which Sher is involved is psychologically precipitated. Jhimma Singh, a local Lambardar and police informer, hears the shooting and deduces the group's subversive intentions. Jhimma's subsequent blackmail of Sher Singh eventually results in the murder of the Lambardar by Sher and his accomplices. Thus the lofty patriotic ideal of violence is reduced to a sordid murder which Sher commits to save his neck. He has been tested and found wanting: he has neither the strength nor the manhood to cope with the 'conflicting emotions of guilt and pride he felt when he killed crane and which the same night brought on an insomniac memory of the end of its struggle in an attitude of prayer. Whatever incipient moral sense he has, is destroyed by his desire to be what he is not. On the other hand, when Sher is arrested on suspicion of murder a painful physical humiliation causes him to weep for two days and shatters his noble image of himself by the time his mother comes to see him he is ready to inform on his comrades. However, because of insufficient evidence, Buta Singh's relationship, with the Deputy Commissioner, and more particularly Sabhrai's strength of character, Sher is saved from betraying his friends and himself, and is released. What Sabhrai tells Sher Singh - it came to her in prayer via the Guru - is hardly what he wanted to hear, but is nevertheless his saving grace: "He said that my son had done wrong. But if he named the people who were with him he would be doing a greater wrong. He is no longer to be regarded as a Sikh and I is not to see his face again" (234).

However, before Sher is released Sabhrai becomes mortally ill. But all that concerns Sher is his sudden emergence as a political leader and hero. Full of nauseous bravado, bogus martyrdom and asciat conceit, he hides all traces of his moral and physical cowardice. Meanwhile his mother is dying a death which is emblematic of the spiritual self-sacrifice she made to save her son, and which contrasts grimly with his co - called sacrifice for the Indian cause. Thus Sher's symbolic killing of the good and diligent soul when he shoots the crane anticipates his later symbolic matricide. That Sher could become little better than an Indian version of a bloody tyrant like Dyer, the English general responsible for the Jallianwala Bag massacre, is suggested by the fact that he has obsessively come to love his dog Dyer whom he had named after the most hated person he could think of. That Sher Singh, given power, will betray the Sikhs and their way of life is a foregone conclusion. Sabhrai is another innately good character. She is a devout orthodox, Sikh mother - dignified, gentle, and spiritually strong.

Khushwant Singh can accept, in the case of people like Jhimma Singh, that "Anyone who has had to live the hard way, literally fighting for survival at every step, doesn't set much store by values like truth, honesty, loyalty or patriotism"(192). The people he really savages are the moral hypocrites who disguise under these values their dishonesty, disloyalty, mendacity and self - interest. Also Khushwant Singh is distrustful of the conversion of



youth to the idea of political revolution, and condemns the religion of the sword philosophy as a rationalisation of violence.

While the political implications of *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* are cynical, the author's sociological observations though marred by over-overt and Western - pitched presentation are arresting and cutting in places. At worst Khushwant Singh fails to integrate satisfactorily the sociology and the narrative. Sex and violence in the western novel, of course, is often the product of formula writing. Obviously Khushwant Singh believes that in the Indian novel they are aspects of life which raise moral and sociological issues peculiar to Indian society.

But in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, Khushwant Singh's presentation of the sexual theme, in contrast to his presentation of the violent theme in the earlier novel, suffers from inadequate unification of action, characterisation and commentary. Sher is revealed as a man attempting to impress his wife, Champak, and to compensate for his 'physical inadequacy' by becoming a public figure. Champak is little more than a sexual automation; she spends her days in auto - erotic nakedness in the bath and before her bedroom mirror and the nights slanting the conversation with her husband to sexual topics in the hope that he will satisfy her before he goes to sleep. These scenes are intended to illustrate Khushwant Singh's sociological contentions that absence of privacy' in Indian life causes sex to be brutal or brief or inhibited and that consequential repressions seek violent or abnormal outlets: "Unfulfilled sexual impulses result in an obsession with sex and in many perversions which result from frustration: sadism, masochism, and, most common of all, exhibitionism" (48).

In the above respects, Sher Singh, accordingly, is a code anti - hero in terms which explicitly relate to Sikh moral concepts and value judgments. It is a pathetic irony that Sher Singh surrounds himself with symbols of militant Sikhdom - emblems of strength- which save merely to highlight his own incapacities. Sher's failure to achieve manhood in the true Sikh sense is continually alluded to. When he weeps after being kicked by the Anglo - Indian sergeant, the Indian head constable whispers: "Be a man. Don't degrade yourself before these white bastards'. Sher's moral cowardice is thrown into incriminating relief by his mother's spiritual strength which, significantly, is inspired by the picture of the last warrior Guru: "There is a man" (123).

But, though *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* lacks a code hero, it has a code heroine in Sabhrai who manifestly has the dignity of an ancient people behind her. The noble verses and spiritual ideals of the Adi Granth, scattered throughout the narrative, are intended to provide not merely insight into the Sikh way of life but also a perspective in the light of which the characters can be morally evaluated: Sabhrai sympathetically, the others ironically. Sabhrai's spiritual and passive qualities represent a moral order which, in the face of violence and evil, is the article of faith with which Khushwant Singh has prevented his disillusionment from perverting his observations of life. Moreover, various humanistic aspects of Sikh belief-for example, the emphasis on love and compassion in the Granth, and the Sikh aversion to excessive asceticism and renunciation - mellow Khushwant Singh's otherwise tough outlook. This toughness of attitude is well complemented by Khushwant Singh's tough style which, in many respects, is reminiscent of Hemingway.

Khushwant Singh's handling of the sexual theme is too mechanical and so he fails to achieve, in this regard, an artistic synthesis of experience and sociological theory. Khushwant Singh's aim to see life in sociological and moral perspective, of course, is an important feature of his fiction.

REFERENCES

1. Adams, Phoebe. "Atlantic Bookshelf." *The Atlantic Monthly*, (1960): 97-102
2. Singh, Khushwant. *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. New Delhi: Times Books International, 1989.
3. "Interview with Indian Writers." *Guest of Honour Programme*. Australian Broadcasting Commission, 5 April, 1964.
4. Shahane, V.A. *Khushwant Singh*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972.