

Review Article

Mixing of Politics And Religious Faith: An Examination of KHUSHWANT SINGH'S *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*

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OVERVIEW

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale is located in the ambiguous and disturbed pre-partition period, and concentrates on the inner tensions and external movements of a well-to-do Sikh family in the Punjab from April 1942 to April 1943. It was the period of the 'Quit India' conflagration, and naturally the relations between the bureaucracy and the people were more than strained. While Buta Singh the Senior Magistrate is anxious to be on the right side of the Government, his son Sher is involved in the activities of a terrorist group of students including Madan who is a brilliant cricketer doubled with a rake. Sher's young wife, Champak, is little more than a bitch, and the novel describes at some length her exercises in sensuality. The triumph of the book is really the portrait of Sabhrai, Buta Singh's wife. Her faith in the Guru and in the Adi Granth is unshakable. When Sher is arrested and all others feel dazed or mad, Sabhrai says quietly: "We shall have a non-stop reading of the Granth for two days and nights. The Guru will be our guide". When the consensus in the family is that Sher should secure his release even going to the extent of betraying his comrades, Sabhrai keeps her own counsel. She spends a whole night in the Gurudwara, seeking light, seeking a clue:

Why didn't the Guru guide her in her hour of need? Had she lost faith? She recalled the time when she had come to this very temple to take part in the cleaning of the sacred pool . . . People said the hawk of the last Guru would come to see the cleaning. Non-believers had laughed their vulgar laughter . . . But the hawk had come. With her own eyes she had seen it swoop down from the heavens . . . Was her faith shaking? She tried to dismiss all other thoughts and bring the picture of the last warrior Guru to her mind . . . *There* was a man. He had lost all his

four sons and refused to give in to injustice. She was to lose only one. How had the Guru faced the loss of his children?

When, in the morning, she meets Sher in his prison cell, and he asks her what he should do, she doesn't falter, her faith is like a rock of adamant:

She dried her tears and blew her nose. "Son, I spent last night at the Golden Temple asking the Guru for guidance. I do not know whether I got it right. In any case His orders were for me; nor for you'.

What did He say, Mother? Why don't you tell me?

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 was no longer to be regarded as a Sikh and I was not to see his face again . . . May the Guru be with you in body and in spirit.'

Illiterate, superstitious and old-fashioned – this is how she strikes others, and this how she would have disarmingly described herself – Sabhrai is yet sustained by the old-world tenacity and purity of her faith, and this evokes the respect and admiration of everybody. Joyce Taylor, the Deputy Commissioner's wife, feels specially drawn towards Sabhrai. But the night at the Gurudwara and the excitement of the interview in the jail prove too much for Sabhrai, she has fever and pneumonia, and although Sher is released in the meantime, she doesn't recover. One thing worries her: Had Sher "ignored her advice and confessed? She did not feel strong enough to question him." She calls the family to the bedside, joins the chant of

the morning prayers, and presently her lips stop moving and her face is radiant with an unearthly glow. After this, anything must be an anti-climax, and the widower Buta Singh, now a Companion of the Indian Empire, can be expected to play his appropriate role. He has a successful interview with Jose Taylor, and takes leave of her with the words: "Thank you, madam English poet has said, 'All's well that ends well'". Although not as tightly constructed as *Train to Pakistan* and although lacking its consistency of tone and power of articulation, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* has a vivid sense of time, place and the social milieu; and the figure of Sabhrai wholly redeems the dimness and murkiness of the general atmosphere. The fever of sensuality is easier to describe than the radiance of Faith, and this is the reason why Sabhrai almost 'steals' the novel. It appears that the character of Sabhrai, Khushwant Singh has portrayed his grandmother whom he remembered in one of his writings – "*The Portrait of a Lady*".

Shall Not Hear the Nightingale (1959) is the second novel by Khushwant Singh. The scene of Sabhrai's death contains a clear reference to the title. She knew that her end was near and she said that she did not need a doctor. All members of her family sat around her and her son Sher Singh too joined them. It is Sabhrai alone whom the novelist intended to be the leading light of the novel because it is she who will not hear the nightingale. In the symbolic pattern of the novel and the meaning of the title, the nightingale symbolizes the coming of spring which, in turn, symbolizes the event of India's independence (1947). The symbols do not represent specific historical facts because India became free in August (during the season of rains) and not in spring. The event of independence was not a matter of joy as it was marred by the tragedy of partition and mass-killings. Yet the achievement of India's freedom gave joy to millions of Indian and therefore, the basic meaning of the title is valid and sound. Sabhrai, we learn, will not see the happy day when nightingales will sing, but Sher Singh and others will.

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale has the basic structure of social and political narrative. It is the story of two families, one Sikh and the other Hindu set in the decaying power of the British Raj in the Punjab of the period, from April, 1942 to April, 1943 about five years before the achievement of India's independence (August 15, 1947). Though it deals with a political situation, it has a limited range and a restricted canvas. The form and structure of the novel are conventional and traditional. Its mode of presentation, construction of the plot, characterization, descriptions of nature and setting, exposition of situation and climax are almost entirely conventional.

The first chapter begins with a meaningful reference to the baptism in blood. Sher Singh and his friends are shown engaging in target practice and rifle shooting in a secluded rural area near a swamp. It seems to be a preparatory act of their initiation into the revolutionary creed aimed at driving the British out of India through terrorist means. The boys, a bunch of immature college students, desired to perform a baptism in blood in conformity with the ancient Hindu custom of dipping swords in goat's blood and laying them before Goddess Durga or Kali. Madan Lal, the son of Wazir Chand, who was a local hero, also supported the plan of killing either a deer or a duck. The kids marched ahead and saw a crane followed by its mate. Sher Singh was unwilling to shoot the crane since he believed that if one of a pair is killed, the other dies of grief.

The killing of crane is an utterly senseless act. It symbolizes the impetuosity, recklessness and aggressiveness of youth. Many Indian revolutionaries in the course of India's struggle for freedom followed the way of violence and bloodshed. Both Sher Singh and Madan Lal are insensitive to the finer feelings of love. They betray a defective sensibility. It does not allow them to grow into full stature. Sher Singh's apparently minor encounter with Jhimma Singh is only a small dramatic prelude of the major clash which will engulf him deeply. The young men are involved in a world of violence, blood-shed, cheating and lying with the declared objective of serving the cause of India's freedom. This is obviously a very different world from that of cranes who love and pine for each other. The boys lie to the Lambardar only to discover later their dismay that he is a super liar, who blackmails them and extorts money from them.

Buta Singh's devoted wife, Sabhrai, is the moving spirit of the family. She is deeply religious and the sacred Granth Sahib is the source of all knowledge and enlightenment for her. Although she is an uneducated woman, she has an extraordinary instinctive understanding of life. She very deeply loves Sher Singh, her son, who is an odd combination of youthful bravado and calculated self-interest. The youngman suffers from weak nerves. He wished to benefit from his father's position of authority and also from the new likely sources of political power:

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 the heroic leader of a band of terrorists. Now for the first time he realized how utterly incompatible the two were and he simply had to make a choice. (*I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* P. 15)

Sher Singh could not reconcile the two conflicting worlds and make them serve his self-interest. He had used his father's jeep for this clandestine adventure without his knowledge. The jeep given to Buta Singh for war efforts by the British Government was being used by the son to undermine the effort. This simple incident indicates the cleavage between father and son. Since loyalty to British Raj could no longer be the perennial source of power, position and money, alternative source had to be tapped, and the conflict between Buta Singh and Sher Singh arose out of their differing estimates of the situation. Buta Singh who represents personal gain, advises his son which is indicative of his double faced 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.' (ISNHN p. 27)

Sher Singh's relationship with his father is marked by extreme uneasiness and an odd lack of communication. His relationship with his physically hungry and sexually abnormal life shows a peculiar inadequacy in him. This may partly be the reflection of his defective sensibility. Sher Singh is haunted by the nightmarish experience of killing the innocent crane and the reader gets a glimpse of his wife, Champak, in her sleep:

He woke with a cry of terror and looked round for his wife. His cry has not wakened her. 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 breast. (Ibid p. 18)

Champak is excessively exhibitionistic. This quality is the prime characteristic of her life. She spent as much time as she could in her own room with her radio. She was also given to taking a long time at her bath. On Baisakhi Day, the New Year Day, while Sabhrai concentrated all her mind on religious prayers, she indulged in highly sensuous and sensual activities. She took off all her cloths and stood in front of her full-length dressing table mirror to admire the contours of her chocolate brown body. The following description of her actions speaks for itself:

She loosened her hair and turned round to see how they looked from behind, Her hair fell to the point at which her buttocks rose like softly rounded water-melons. There were dimples on either side of her rear waist. She turned round once more, inhaled deeply, and lifted her breasts with the palms of her hands and then ran her finger round her nipples till they became rounded like berries. She clasped her arms above her head and wriggled her hips in

the manner of hula-hula dancers. She drew her belly in as much as she could and stroked it with her hand down on either side to her knees. She studied her face and figure in all the pastures she had seen in photographs of nude models. She found the reflection in the mirror to her satisfaction. (Ibid p. 45)

Buta Singh and Wazir Chand were both magistrates, but Buta Singh was much closer to Mr. Taylor, the Deputy Commissioner. Therefore, Wazir Chand was envious. Both played their part in the semifeudal world of power and greed in the British-dominated Punjab. Beena, Buta Singh's daughter, befriended Seeta, Wazir Chand's daughter. They studied together for Beena's benefit. Sher Singh is also drawn closer to Madan since they were college companions. Madan's prestigious position, popularity and adventurous life are assets to Sher Singh for winning the students' union elections. Thus, the two families are drawn to each other.

Wazir Chand's family was not much involved with religious rituals like that of Buta Singh. Madan Lal was the hero of the family. He was almost worshipped by his parents. Madan was tall and handsome, affable and attractive, adventurous and unscrupulous. He was the captain of the university cricket team for three years. He had once score 100 runs against a foreign team. He was good at sports, though poor in studies. Madan was involved with Champak. Beena came to know of Champak's affair with Madan. She was also tempted by Madan for a while.

Shunno, a fat middle-aged Hindu woman, is another interesting character in Buta Singh's household. She was a domestic servant and in Sabhrai's absence bossed over Mundoo, the servant boy. She once went out to seek the help of Peer Sahib, a Muslim divine to get a cure for her mysterious disease. She approached him because she had no faith in either Eastern or Western medicines. Peer Sahib was a youngman of thirty, tall, wiry, with a rich mellifluous voice. Though committed to the vows of celibacy, he promptly seduced her by first calling her "daughter". He thought that after all she was an infidel woman, who might in this way be brought on the right path. He also believed his actions did not violate the rules of celibacy and Shunno, after an initial nominal protest, seems to have enjoyed herself in the process:

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. (Ibid p. 141)

The affair between Shunno and Peer Sahib is presented as a counterpart to the illicit relationship between Madan and Champak. Whereas Madan and Champak belong to the upper class society, Shunno and Peer Sahib are from lower sections of the society. But their repressed selves and urges are universal. The spectacle of a Muslim divine, given to the ways of the God, seducing a middle aged Hindu widow, is an excellent example of Singh's irony. Here the naked and bitter fact of human existence is effectively exposed in the scenes between Shunno and Peer Sahib.

It is Sher Singh's impulsive, immature, pseudo-patriotism which set into motion the forces of violence and destruction resulting in the unpremeditated murder of Jimma Singh, the village Lambardar, at the hands of young revolutionaries. He had demanded three hundred rupees from the youngsters who had practiced rifle shooting near the bridge and his attempt at blackmail resulted in his murder. His duplicity was shown earlier in his act of handing over the six empty cartridge cases to the police. Mr. Taylor's part in this sordid affair is marked by decency, fact and caution. He sent for Buta Singh, offered him tea, and then gave the shocking news that his house was being searched in his absence and that Sher Singh was being held in custody on a suspected charge of murder of Jimma Singh. The presumption that the lambardar was murdered was a belated discovery, and none really knew the truth. There was no tangible evidence of Sher Singh's involvement in this sad event, yet Mr. Taylor suggested that Sher Singh might be made the witness for the state, if he confessed. Buta was almost stunned by this unexpected turn of events and tears rolled down his cheeks. His world of ambition and power was destroyed overnight. The old man lost his nerve, and even Champak passed through a period of purification in the course of this unforeseen catastrophe.

Sabhari is the female spirit who becomes the saviour of all those lost souls. She received a telegram from Buta Singh at Simla asking her to return home at once. She was received at the station by Mrs. Joyce Taylor. She prayed to God to give her light and hope in that dark, depressing hour. On reaching home, she found everything in disarray: her son Sher Singh in jail, Champak was greatly shaken and forlorn, Buta Singh, a picture of utter despair, self pity and sulkiness. She, too, was shocked but quickly regained her posture and poise.

Sher Singh, who had looked forward to a glorious political career, now found himself lodged in jail on a suspected criminal charge. His experience with the Anglo-Indian sub-inspector who hit him on the ankles, made him extremely miserable. He dreaded a visit from his father in jail. In jail, he did not know whether to succumb to the pressure of the

police and reveal the names of the young boys who were involved in that fatal attack on Jimma Singh or keep them a complete secret. The way out of this awful impasse was found by Sabhrai, who expressed her willingness to meet her son in jail, a decision which came as a relief to Buta Singh. Sabhrai put her heart in the nonstop reading of the Granth, the sacred book of the Sikhs, but it was of no avail in as much as the solution seemed to elude her. Sabhrai decided to spend the long cold winter night in the premises of the Gurudwara in search of the word of God:

She found a spot from where she could see the dome of the temple and reflection of the moon and the stars in the dark waters of the sacred pool. She sat down on the hard and cold marble floor. An icy wind blew over the water, through the trellised fence, into her bones. But it was absolutely still and peaceful. The city was asleep, only the gentle clop clop of ripples on marble and the boom of the tower clock striking the hours disturbed the heavy silence. Sabhrai did not know what prayer one recited during the night, so went through all she knew by heart. When she had finished the clock struck two. But the tumult in her mind was not stilled. (Ibid p. 202)

She questioned herself and then she recalled that she had seen the divine hawk perched on the pinnacle of the golden dome of the temple. She collected her vision of Guru Govind Singh, the great martyr who had lost his four sons in the crusade against fanaticism. She then recited the inspiring verses:

Eternal God, who art our shield,

The dagger, knife, the sword we wield

To us protector there is given

The timeless, deathless lord of heaven. (Ibid p.204)

As Sabhrai's prayer concluded, the gray light of the dawn broke and brought hope and confidence to her anguished heart. She found peace in her soul and returned home to be ready for her visit to see Sher Singh in jail. During their meeting in jail Sher Singh sought her advice in this life and death matter. She told him to look to the Guru for guidance. She also narrated to him what Guru answered to her prayer : "He said that my son had done wrong. But if he named the people who were with him he would be doing a great wrong. He was no longer to be regarded as Sikh and I was not to see his face again. (p. 208). Sabhrai passed the sacred dust on her son's forehead, blessed him and left.

Sher Singh was ordered to be released from jail on the eve of Christmas day. It was a generous Christmas gift of the Taylors to the Buta Singh family. After all Sher Singh was held solely on suspicion and since no tangible evidence was available it seemed morally wrong to prolong his agony. Madan organised a fine reception on his release from jail. Prof. I.K. Masih finds:

In fact the main theme of the novel appears to be the two powerful impulses which had gripped the heart and the mind of the Indians during 1942-43. On the one hand was the loyalty for the British Government and the crown and on the other, the love and devotion to one's motherland, the nationalist feeling. On one side were the benefit of loyalty to the crown as it gave power and prestige and money too. It gave impetus to the feeling of slavery and self annihilation. The feelings of nationalism were aimed at liberty, not only physical but spiritual too, though its paths were strewn with thorns and despair. Khuswant Singh has presented the story of Buta Singh's family caught in these opposite powerful forces. Buta Singh as a senior magistrate is loyal to the crown. This loyalty has given him everything he has. He has money, power and status. He is afraid to change his present comfort and position to the uncertainty of any other path.¹

Sher Singh is something different. He takes his father as a safe sanctuary for his nationalist and terrorist activities. He lacks the flamboyance of his father. The novelist has failed to bring out the real revolutionary in Sher Singh. He is a person who has been caught in the flux. He is almost a victim of his voluptuous wife. He timidly reacts to the callings of a terrorist leader. He wants to become a hero without undergoing the pangs of sufferings and sacrifices. He wants to cash his release when he writes to Madan:

Dear Madan,

You will be glad to hear that I am being released tomorrow. Please convey this information to all my friends in the university but not to my parents for whom I want it to be pleasant surprise. The police did their worst to get information from me but they failed. I am proud to have been able to serve my God and my country. We should exploit this little service I have done to our best advantage. Greetings to all the comrades in arms.

Live long the Revolution.

Your brother

Sher (ISNHN, p. 223)

Sher Singh intends to exploit the situation without any service to the country. His revolution has no gun power. It is all managed. Basically, he is an opportunist like the Lambardar and police informer, Jimma Singh whom he opposes and finally kills. Though he is caught in the whirlwind of independence movement but fails to rise equal to the occasion and remains a dead weight. Sabhrai is the only character who serves the family of Buta Singh. She is illiterate rustic, but her simplicity and faith in the Gurus holds the novel together. In fact she has failed to share the glory of British Raj with her husband. Mr. A.V. Shahana writes:

I Shall Not Hear The Nightingale has many weak elements but it succeeds, through the portrayal of Sabhrai, in communicating the innate understanding of life, the moral prophetic power that issues from a deeply religious personality and a wisdom that supersedes all rational modes of thought.²

Sabhrai transcends the limitations of time and boundaries and becomes one with voice of truth. She accepts the death of her son and keeps the torch of truth and liberty alive. After her mission is over she comes back and embraces death with a smile on her lips.

John Taylor gives out the best in Britishman's life and thought. He carries with him the message of Christ. He is not only superior officer of Buta Singh but he understands and solves the problems of the people in human terms. He assures Buta Singh:

You know we are anxious to get out of India and hand over the reins of power to you people as soon as the war is won . . . In fact I am not on the side of Mr. Churchill but on that of Mr. Gandhi and Nehru. (Ibid p. 180)

This is the glorious side of an Englishman's character that he could see that India has a soul of its own and the English people had no business to be in India. Many of them had deep study of Indian history, religion and culture. They were also aware of their own hollowness. Mr. Taylor understands and foresees the difficulty ahead. He realizes that the Britishers will have to leave India and make way for the natives. He rules without hatred and wins the Indians will love. On the other side there are English administrators and police officers whose harms and wrongs committed on Indians will never be forgotten. The two hundred years old wounds, bitter memory of exploitation will remain for next fifty years. The Alsatian dog of Sher Singh is named after Dyer, the General who killed hundreds of innocent Indians in Jallianwala Bagh. Dyer, the dog symbolizes the mute anger of the Indian masses. The English were agonized by the silent protest

and resistance of the Indian people. They could hardly resist the silent outburst and leave India to save their souls. Their final departure does not establish either the goodness or the badness of their intentions.

Taylor represents the younger, forward-looking element of the Indian Civil Service, and his assessment seems well thought out. His relationship with Buta Singh maintains the administrator's delicate poise between judicious reserve and genuine friendship. His behaviour towards Buta Singh demonstrates his decorum and dignity. He endeavours to bridge the gap between scrupulousness for legal justice and a genuine sympathy for the Sikhs. Joyce Taylor plays an important part in the humanistic chain of events, which suggests that she is the European counterpart of Sabhrai. It is their moral uprightness and energy of a spirit which contains the aggressive forces of evil and violence of all the characters. Sabhrai alone appears as the three dimensional character. She is the female spirit who becomes the savior of lost souls. She embodies the instinctive understanding of life and the wisdom of the race. Khushwant Singh says, "Sabhrai was possessed of that sixth sense which often goes with the people of deep religious convictions." People believed that "she had some sort of intuition," and "the healing touch". Though she suffers a break down in the end, she is mystically inclined, but her faith and affirmation emerge stronger in the process of adverse experience. She is a rustic and uneducated woman yet her mystical awareness of life baffles even the most sophisticated and articulate exponents of intelligence. By virtue of her moral rigor and instinctive wisdom she becomes a towering figure far higher in stature than others in the novel, who represents the value of reason. When she is dying, she passes to the other world with a unique passionless, peace and tranquility. We see the family of Buta Singh reciting the prayer with the dying Sabhrai:

There is one God,

He is the supreme truth.

He, the Creator,

Is without fear and without hate. (Ibid p. 233)

Sabhrai seeks the path of love through self-denial and suffering. She redeems the human world around her through death, and in the process she endows other characters with sanctity. She embodies the motif of love. The motif of love is thus the basic principle.

The novelist has succeeded in presenting the turmoil of the freedom struggle during 1942-43. It shows the Indians strive towards an uncertain future, most like Buta Singh, would never fit in the new India. Sabhrai says to Sher Singh "I shall not hear the Nightingale, my son."

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