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Address: - Ashak Hussain Malik House No. 221 Gangoo, Pulwama, Jammu and Kashmir, India - 192301, Cell: 09086405302, 09906662570, Ph. No: 01933-212815,

Email: nairjc5@gmail.com, info@nairjc.com Website: www.nairjc.com

I SHALL NO HEAR THE NIGHTINGALE: A NOVEL OF SOCIAL REALISM

PROF. DR. PRADIP G. SONAWANE

Late. M. D. Sisode Arts & Commerce College, Nardana Tal – Shindkheda, Dist. Dhule (M.S) India

PRIN. DR. A.P.KHAIRNAR

Adarsh College of Arts Nijampur-Jaitane. Tal- Sakri Dist. Dhule (M.S) India

ABSTRACT

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale is Khushwant Singh's second novel. The time of action of the novel is April 1942 to 1943. It gives a panoramic view of contemporary Indian life. Khushwant Singh has interpreted his life experiences before independence of India in this novel. As K. K. Sharma Says, "The novel should interpret the truth of life from felt experience, and not from books" (5) Khushwant Singh was born and lived before and after the period of independence of India, so his novels present his experiences of contemporary society. During this period many Indian national heroes were fighting against the British Government for India's freedom and many Indians were working as servants in the British Raj. Khushwant Singh reflects social realism through this novel.

Key Terms: Social Realism, Partition, Terrorist acts, Nightingale, The Gun, Granth Sahib

Khushwant Singh has written a number of short stories, a concise history of Sikhs, biographies of Sikh leaders, five novels such as *Train to Pakistan*, *Delhi*, *I Shall Hear Nightingale* and articles revealing his literary abilities. His art and mind are permitted by a genuine Punjabi consciousness. Therefore, unlike the work of some other Indian English writers; his writing has grown out of the grass roots of the social milieu. His real experience provides him the necessary setting and understanding of men and situations in rural India. His exploration of the experience of rural India is the basic fact of his creative endeavor.

Social Realism, in the visual arts and literature is the portrayal of subjects as they appear in everyday life without establishment or interpretation. The term is used to describe works of art which, in explaining a truth, may emphasize the ugly or sordid. Social realism depicts man and society as complete entities instead of showing merely one or the other of these aspects. Social realism has three dimensions; it has an independent life, characters and human relationships. It involves a rejection of the emotional and intellectual dynamism which necessarily develops together with the modern words. It opposes the destruction of completeness of the human personality and of the objective typicality of men and situations through an excessive cult of the momentary mood.

Social realism is a creative process in art. The man's intellectual activities which involve thinking in terms of image are most important for creativity. These images are engendered in the artists mind by the outside world. Raymond Williams says in this connection that: "*In the west alongside the received uses a use of 'realism' in the sense of 'fidelity' to psychological reality has been widely evident, the point being made that we*

can be conceived of the reality of an experience of its essential realism, by many different kinds of artistic methods and with no necessary restriction of subject matter to the ordinary, the contemporary and the every day” (582)

Social Realism is an indirect reproduction of reality. It is a system of conventions producing a lifelike illusion of some ‘real’ world outside the text, by processes of ‘selection’, exclusion, description and manners of addressing the reader. Social realism also established itself as an important tradition in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Social realism is the recognition of the fact that a work of literature does not rest on a lifeless average, as the naturalist suppose and on an individual principle which dissolves its own self into nothingness.

Anjaneyulu states; “*I shall not Hear the Nightingale, like, Train to Pakistan, is not merely a record of real theme, real characters and real incidents but it is more than that it is a creative rendering of the real. In I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale he portrays realism photographically and accurately*” (69) The novel is a story of the Punjab during world War - II so it is concerned with the situation of Second World War in which the British Government was caught in a plight. The novel focuses on the colonial encounter between Indians and the British Government against the background of the Punjab. Punjab is known for its own distinctive geographical features, its military history and Sikh religion which easily set it off from other social cultures of India.

The novel presents all sort of hidden fluctuations of the contemporary society. It deals with the period of the 1940’s In India when the emergence of national consciousness among the Indians caused colonial encounter between the Indians and the British, which was moving towards a climax. Khushwant Singh has presented the mixed reaction of Indians towards the British Raj and a microscopic picture of the strange mixture of attitudes to the foreign rule through the description of life in Amritsar district. The situation presented in this novel is similar to the situation of other colonized countries, like Africa and West Indies.

The novelist has combined virtues of knowledge and love in the character of Sabhrai. Whenever her family is in a difficult situation she seeks the Guru’s advice and utilizes her intellect to take proper decisions. She is the product of knowledge and love. As U. A. Shahane observes; “*The portrayal of Sabhrai, in my view, is the kernel of I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, it is its heart; it is central to the novel’s human drama, and its value pattern*” (105)

I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale is one of the finest realistic novels of the post-World War II, in India. Its social realism is well found in title, plot, structure, irony, theme, symbols, religion, politics, family relationships, characterization, language and sex. In explaining the title of the novel, the important question is who the “I” in the novel is. This is relevant to any evaluation of the meaning and significance of the novel.

“*I* in the title stands for Sabhrai. The title is taken from her dialogue with her son. When Sabhrai knows that her end is near, she says, she doesn’t need a doctor and further says “*Let me go to my Guru with your blessings*” (ISNHN, 260) Khushwant Singh explains the incident of Sabhrai’s death from an Indian perspective. All members of her family sit around her and her son Sher Singh joins them;” Sabhrai woke up as soon as he came in- just as if she had been waiting for him all the time. She smiled and beckoned him to come close to her. She whispered in his ear. “*I Shall not hear the nightingales, my son, May the Guru give you long life*” (ISNHN, 261)

The nightingale also symbolizes the coming of spring. It symbolizes the most important event of India's independence in 1947. But these symbols do not represent specific historical facts because India did not achieve independence during the reason of spring but in the rainy season on 15th August. The implication is that the achievement of independence like the spring gives joy to millions. It means that Sobhrai will not see those happy days of Indian freedom, when nightingales will sing but Sher Singh and others will. The symbol of the nightingale is thus subjected to the pervasive effect of Khushwant Singh's tentative realism.

Sher Singh, the son of Buta Singh, and his friends along with Madan, son of Wazir Chand decide to become terrorists to break the shackles of subjection of the Indians. They want to drive English men away from India. So they arrange meetings with other collage mates. They decide to begin their patriotic act from the "Baptism

In blood."(ISNHN, 4) Their desire to perform the drama of "Baptism of blood" resembles the ancient Hindu myth of dipping swords in the blood of goats and laying them before goddess Durga or Kali. Myth is a traditional tale common to the members of a tribe, race or nation, which usually involves the supernatural or serves as to explain some natural phenomenon.

In the novel, to baptize the weapon, Sher Singh shoots a Sarus crane. Its male follows and tries to attack them because "If one of a pair is killed, the other dies of grief," Such belief was deeply rooted in ancient Indian society. This belief develops a sense of guilt in the mind of Sher Singh. Khushwant Singh dislikes killing of innocent birds and ironically dissuades people to shoot them. Khushwant Singh points out social realism through the drawbacks of Indian society such as Dowry system, Population growth, corruption, child marriages and labor, condition of domestic servants in the novel I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale, "Dowry System Is very hazardous in India which sometimes ruins girl's families. A peasant woman in the novel is worried about the marriages of her five daughters. Girls are a burden on the parents of poor families. Their marriage requires more money.

Khushwant Singh points out social realism through highlighting child marriages and child labour in India. Sher Singh is prematurely married with Champak and Madan is a father of a son in his college life. Mundoo, thirteen years old boy, is a servant in Buta Singh's house. He gets bad treatment from his mistress Champak and maid servant Shunno. Sher Singh says; "*The condition of domestic servants is one of the most pressing problems of urban society. We work them twenty-four hours of the day, underpay, underfed and undercloth them. Their living quarters are filthy. They are abused and beaten at will. They are dismissed without notice after a disgraceful search of their belongings*"(ISNHN, 52). Such is the lot of servants in metropolitan cities 'Search of their belonging' shows the degradation of faith and development of misapprehension in the human race. With the help of the incident of Peer Sahib and Shunno, he criticizes the belief Indian people in Sadhus and the inhuman rules of Indian society which inflict injustice upon widows. Though Indians are living in modernity today, still there are some castes in India which prohibit the remarriage of widows.

Khushwant Singh satirizes the brutal practices of the police in the novel. He presents the significant scene in which Sher Singh is abused and beaten in his own house. Sher Singh is suspected for the murder of Jhimma Singh. Deputy Commissioner, John Taylor suspects the hand of Sher Singh in the murder of Jhimma Singh. So he issues two warrants, one to arrest Sher Singh and the other to search the house of Buta Singh for any explosive. The police raid the house of Buta Singh. Sher Singh observes the white sergeants sitting in the

armchairs with their legs on the table and smoking. Sher Singh asks them if they have come to see his father. There upon the head constable seizes his hand. Sher Singh with angry tone asks them “*How dare you put your hands on me! What authority...*” (ISNHN197) The Sergeant calls Sher Singh a bugger and without warning, strikes his knee exactly in to Sher Singh’s privates with full intention. As he suffers from pain the sergeant hits him on the face.

Nobody dares to rescue Sher Singh from the clutches of police except his loyal dog Dyer, an Alsatian. The dog leaps at Sergeant with savage fury and knocks him down. He tears the collar off the white man’s coat and tries to catch his throat. The other police come and save his life. They beat the dog with iron shod bamboo poles, blood flows from the dog’s face; the bone of his leg is fractured. The Sergeant attempts to shoot the dog but the other sergeant prevents him by saying that the English offices are mad about dogs.

Khushwant Singh also puts forth social realism by satirizing the duplicity of the bureaucrats of lower government functionaries and inequality in the applications of law by them and treating powerful persons above the law. When Sher Singh and his friends return from their target practice Jumma Singh stops them and demands licence for gun. Sher Singh shows the licence issued in the name of his father Buta Sing.

Khushwant Singh minutely observes social political and family situations that even a minor incident cannot escape his attention. The predicaments of millions of thirsty and hungry young Indian married couples have been presented vividly and appropriately. With the help of Champak - Sher Singh-Madan relationship he has presented hypocrisy prevalent in Indian society.

Champak, wife of Sher Sing is interested in sex and Sher Singh is interested in politics. These two opposite temperaments come together through an arranged marriage. Moreover, Sher Singh is prematurely married with Champak. He is a political leader so he has no spare time to spend with his family. Generally political leader’s do not spare time for their families and keep themselves busy in the political activities.

Sabhrai is a replica of traditional Indian woman. Sabhrai, the Sikh woman, the wife of Buta Singh, is the most important character in the novel. She is the noblest of all characters created by Khushwant Singh. She appears as a three dimensional character in the novel. She embodies the instinctive understanding of life and the wisdom of the race. Khuswant Singh says; “*Sabhrai was possessed of that sixth sense, which often goes with people of deep religious convictions*” (ISNHN, 141)

Sabhrai is a woman of great simplicity, and woman with religious mind. As Sheo Bhushan Sukla and Rini Sukla say about her that; “*The noblest of all these creations is Sabhrai. She is simple, religious and devoted to her own family. Though uneducated, she has a charm of her own and is able to influence even Mr. Taylor.*”(ISNHN, 342),*People believed that she had some sort of intuition which told her of events to come.*”(ISNHN, 14) And “*The healing touch*” (ISNHN, 141). Since she showed a deep insight into life. Sabhrai represents the wisdom of the ancients, the power to probe into the realities of life and discovers the truth of man’s existence.

The character of the Sabhrai is the leading light and moving spirit of the family. When Sher Singh is arrested and all others feel mad, she calmly says, “*We shall have a non - stop reading of the Granth for two days and nights. The Guru will be our guide.*”(ISNHN, 213). When the common opinion of the family is that Sher

Singh should secure his release, she spends the whole night in the gurudwaras, seeking light and a right approach. Granth Sahib is the source of all her wit and wisdom and it gives proper advice to her.

Buta Singh is the senior magistrate in the British Raj. He knows that there is no homogeneous society in India and that is a mosaic of many castes and cultures, like, the Muslims, the Sikhs, the Hindu and others. He knows that the ethnic conflicts can be sparked off in the country at the slightest provocation and result in violence and chaos. He therefore, believes that the British rule can keep this violent and conflicting force under check and bring political unity of India.

Khushwant Singh highlights the greatness of India that though there are conflicting forces in Indian society, Indians do not make any racial discrimination. It is an admitted fact that there are differences of castes like the upper classes and the untouchables but the upper castes never killed untouchables as Hitler killed Jews by putting them in gas chambers. India is the country in the world which keeps unity in diversity. Better brains are always worshipped in India by forgetting differences of religions and caste.

Sher Singh's character shows, how patriotism was imbibed in Indian boys from their childhood before independence of India. Indira Nityanandam observes; "*Sher Singh epitomizes the post - colonial tendency to question the colonizer and also express their anguish at the plight of the colonized. He wishes to restore his land and country to its pre. Colonial state.*"(77). Sher Singh is able to look at the history of his own country of heroes like Shivaji. Rana Pratap or of Guru Govind Singh. Sher Singh becomes an embodiment of the nationalistic ideal. Thus the conflict between the pro-British attitude and the anti-British comes into operation in one and the same family which may be said to be a microscopic symbol of the microscopic phenomenon of the Indian political life.

Thus to conclude, Khushwant Singh's language is thoroughly Indian and has many glimpses of Indianness. The description in the novel is so vivid that it creates pre-independent Indian scenario. Sometimes he uses direct literal translation of Indian or Punjabi proverbs, idioms and phrases " *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*" does not go beyond the obvious limits of social and political narrative fiction of contemporary interests. Its social milieu has a limited range. It is realistic in every aspect of society which is reflected in it. It is a harbinger of the partition of India and Pakistan while Train to Pakistan shows the ghastly effects of partition upon Hindus and Muslims. Khushawant Singh is a realist and modernist in the sense that he has the courage to look into the face of harsh reality and describe it precisely and objectively without any sentimentalism. Thus the novel is the reflection of social realism.

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