

The Narrative Design in Khushwant Singh's *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*

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ABSTRACT

The wide, extensive, social and political presentation is the essence of the narrative design of *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Surely it is primarily a drama of two families but it indeed, goes far beyond the boundaries of family life in portraying phases and changes in social and political situations and their motivations. The basic theme as interlinked with symbol in the narrative design, is that of love as a solvent of the problems of life, human, social, cultural and political. A defined corpus has been selected from the novel which comprises some fictional conversations and narrative pieces, subsequently analysed from a critical and literary perspective.

This research paper will delve into the narrative design of Khushwant Singh's *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* (1959) that has a historical and contemporary context rooted in character and situation. To achieve this purpose, a defined corpus has been selected from the novel which comprises some fictional conversations and narrative pieces, subsequently analysed from a critical and literary perspective. The study is one of the plausible readings for the understanding of Khushwant Singh's historical piece that involves the reader in the realm of India's mysticism. It is an effort to decipher the complexity and ambiguity of the social struggle beyond the binary opposition of the coloniser and the colonised.

The character of Buta Singh, the Sikh magistrate, is particularly relevant and revealing in this respect. Quite curiously it is the English couple, Mr. And Mrs. Taylor, who provide an acute insight into the personality of Buta Singh, who is an important character in the novel's narrative design. It is the Taylors' "private language of accent, emphasis and gesture" which reveals not merely the basic characteristics of Buta Singh but also the concept of the plot and modes of development in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Mrs. Joyce Taylor had paid a visit to Buta Singh's home and was puzzled by his character and personality, "Curious lot, aren't they?" she asked her husband, "I don't understand the old Walrus with his obsequious 'respected Memsahib' ..." "Don't be too hard on the old stick," said Mr. Taylor, "he's been brought up like that. The English are his Mai-Bap, Father-Mother when they are about; when they are not, he is more himself." (*Nightingale* 218) Then, Mrs. Taylor couldn't understand why, if Buta Singh was a loyal supporter of the British Raj, he allowed his son, Sher Singh, to mix up with Indian revolutionaries. In answering this pertinent question, Mr. Taylor has almost revealed the basic narrative design, the fundamental structure and the real intention of *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*:

Says Mr. Taylor to Mrs. Joyce Taylor,

"Well! In a way you have the history of Indo-British relationships represented by Buta Singh's family tree. His grandfather fought against us in the Sikh wars; his father served us loyally. He has continued to do so

with certain reservations. His son is impatient to get rid of us. Poor Buta Singh is split between the past and the future: that is why he appears so muddled in the present. He is not as much of a humbug as he appears to be." (*Nightingale* 218)

This wide, extensive, social and political presentation is the essence of the narrative design of *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Surely it is primarily a drama of two families but it indeed, goes far beyond the boundaries of family life in portraying phases and changes in social and political situations and their motivations.

The situation in the first chapter of the novel is illustrative of the mode of presentation of the novelist. It begins with a meaningful reference to the "baptism in blood," an idea which displays a severe contrast to the atmosphere symbolised by the title. 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 the 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 "Sarus 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." (*Nightingale* 6). Madan Lal sneered at Sher's notion and the implied weak nerves which made Sher accept the challenge. He pulled the trigger and "the bullet hit its mark. A cloud of feathers flew up and the bird fell in the mud." Dyer, the Alsatian dog, ran after it and Sher Singh was torn between a sense of guilt and a feeling of pride in accurate shooting. He walked over to the place where the wounded bird had fallen and putting "his right foot upon its neck" shot it "with a revolver." The crane died. Sher Singh tried to kill the mate too but couldn't. The mate cried in pain and "the anguished cry of the flying crane was almost human."

In his excitement Sher Singh forgot to pick up six empty cases of bullets, an act which finally led to the nemesis. He was met with the *lambardar*, Jhimma Singh, the village headman, who first demanded their licences but later not only withdrew his demand but flattered Sher Singh as he was told that the boy was the son of Buta Singh, the powerful magistrate of the district. Thus, the duplicity, in words and deeds, which is the primary quality of Jhimma Singh is shown in his very first appearance. Sher Singh, suspecting Jhimma Singh to be an informer of the police, cleverly introduced his friends to the *lambardar* under false names. The affair ended apparently without any untoward incident but as the boys were preparing to leave in a jeep, the female crane flew along as if it was in pursuit of its lost mate. Though at times it seemed to have retreated, "it kept calling all the time."

This first scene is highly suggestive of the impending development of situation and character in the novel. Khushwant Singh appears to have a pronounced ornithological involvement with life; he seems extremely fond of birds and therefore portrays the life, habitat and activities of birds as part of the symbolic pattern of his novels. The Sarus crane symbolises the motif of love, mating and sacrifice. The brutal, almost inhuman, separation of the male and the female cranes caused by Sher Singh's and Madan's heartless actions clearly shows that neither Sher Singh nor Madan Lal has any genuine awareness of love or man's genuine feeling for woman.

Sher Singh's apparently minor encounter with Jhimma Singh in this chapter is only a small dramatic rehearsal of the major clash, which in future is to engulf him deeply. The young men are involved in a world of violence, bloodshed, 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 to their dismay that he is a super-liar, who blackmails them and extorts money from them. This world of bloodshed and blackmail, violence and venom, unreality and unchastity is presented against the setting of the cry of the crane and the much-looked-forward-to song of the nightingale.

Other members of Buta Singh's household are introduced to the reader. 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 extraordinarily profound and instinctive understanding of life. She loves very deeply Sher Singh, her son, who is an odd combination of youthful bravado and calculated self-interest. The young man suffers from weak nerves and therefore "the figure of the crane flying in the dark" haunted him. He wished to benefit from his father's position of authority and 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." (*Nightingale* 15)

Since loyalty to British Raj could no longer be the perennial source of power, position and money, alternative sources 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, proffers advice to his son which shows 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."
." (*Nightingale* 27)

Whereas Sher Singh's relationship with Buta Singh is marked by extreme uneasiness and an odd lack of communication, his relationship with his physically hungry and sexually abnormal wife, the "tempestuous Champak" betrays a peculiar inadequacy in him for which there are no explicit reasons. 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 Champak in her sleep. Champak is excessively fond of exhibitionism which is the prime characteristic of her being. 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 concentrates all her mind on religious prayers, Champak indulges in highly sensuous and sensual activities. Champak (the name of a fragrant flower) is, at the same time, also involved in a long-drawn clandestine flirtation with Madan at Simla.

Buta Singh and Wazir Chand were both magistrates but Buta Singh was much closer to Mr. Taylor, the Deputy Commissioner, which aroused Wazir Chand's envy. Both play their part in the semi-feudal world of power and greed in the British-dominated Punjab. Beena, Buta Singh's daughter, befriends Seeta, Wazir Chand's daughter and they study together for Beena's benefit. Sher Singh, too, is drawn closer to Madan since they are college companions and Madan's prestigious position, popularity and bold adventurousness are assets to Sher Singh for winning the Students' Union elections. Thus, the two families are drawn to each other so much so that the whole family of Buta Singh pays an un-scheduled visit to Wazir Chand's home which takes him unawares and creates almost a comic situation.

Wazir Chand's household, unlike that of Buta Singh, was not much involved with religious ritual. They had only "a large colour print of Krishna" which was occasionally "garlanded by Wazir Chand's wife." Their son, Madan Lal, was the hero of the family and was almost worshipped by his parents. He was tall and handsome, affable and attractive, adventurous and unscrupulous. He had captained the University Cricket team for three years and scored a century against a foreign visiting side. He was good at sports, though poor in studies and presented a contrast not only to his sister, Seeta, but also to Sher Singh.

Beena, the simpleton of the Buta Singh family, is 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 the absence of Sabhrai, bossed over Mundoo, the servant boy. Sabhrai had

gone to Simla to meet Beena and Champak and to watch the relationship between Champak and Madan and Shunno ran the household. Mundoo was deeply annoyed by Sabhrai's bossing and, as a clever trick, poured the strange mixture in Shunno's drinking water vessel. This comic event affected Shunno in curious ways and she decided to seek the help of Peer Sahib, a Muslim divine to get a cure for this mysterious disease. She approached him because she had no faith in eastern or western medicines.

Peer Sahib was a young man 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 action did not "violate the rules of celibacy". This 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 stratum of the hierarchical Indian society, Shunno and Peer Sahib hail from lower sections of society. But their repressed selves and urges have a common denominator which is human and universal and therefore their responses to the experience of "tearing off the padding of respectability" are similar. This attempt to depict and expose the "tearing off the padding of respectability" is a significant aspect of the realist in Khushwant Singh and his quest for physical reality, bare and naked in all its horror and elemental passion.

It is Sher Singh's half-baked, impulsive, immature pseudo-patriotism which set into motion the forces of violence and destruction which result in the unpremeditated murder of Jhimma Singh, the village *lambardar*, at the hands of the young, impetuous revolutionaries. He had demanded three hundred rupees from the youngsters who had practised 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, tact and caution. He obviously felt unhappy over Sher Singh's reported involvement with the hot-headed revolutionaries since he was genuinely interested in the welfare of Buta Singh and his family. He sent for Sher Singh on purpose and while they talked, he suggestively played with the empty cartridge cases on his table. He even arranged to send a licence for a gun for the young man lest he indulged in unlawful activities which would land him and his father in tight and troubled corners. But the irony of the situation is that, precisely what Mr. Taylor intended to avoid, happened and Sher Singh was involved in the tragic drama of his own making.

Buta Singh was sent for by the Taylors who 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 the murder of Jhimma Singh. The presumption that the *lambardar* was murdered was a belated discovery and more 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 King's approver, if he confessed the act. Buta Singh was almost stunned by this unexpected turn of events and tears rolled down his cheeks in sorrow and despair. His world of ambition and power was destroyed overnight and his hopes of getting knighted in the forthcoming

New Year's Honors List were turned to dust. The old man lost his nerves and even Champak passed through a period of purification in the course of this unforeseen catastrophe.

Sabhrai is the female spirit who becomes the saviour of all these lost souls. She received a telegram from Buta Singh at Simla asking her to return home at once. The world of telegrams and violence thus invaded her serene and religious world of moral values. She was received at the station by Mrs. Joyce Taylor, which was a fine gesture of humanity and decorum. 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 was 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 looked forward to a glorious political career, now found himself lodged in jail on a suspected criminal charge. His experience of the Anglo-Indian sub-inspectors who hit him on the ankles, made him extremely miserable and broke his heart. He dreaded a visit from his father in jail as much as the father did visiting his son in jail. In jail Sher Singh was on the horns of a dilemma whether to succumb to the pressure of the police and reveal the names of the young boys who were involved in that awful attack on Jhimma Singh or keep them a complete secret. Did the police really know what had happened or were they merely groping in the dark?

The way out of this awful impasse was found by Sabhrai, who expressed her wish to meet with her son in jail, a decision which came as a relief to Buta Singh. Sabhrai put her heart in the non-stop reading of the *Granth Sahib*, the sacred book of the Sikhs, but it was of no avail in as much as the solution seemed to elude her. During these days of distress, Sabhrai's only companion was Dyer, the faithful dog. He remained constantly in her company as though by some unknowable, intangible mode, he read her thoughts. Sher Singh, too, remembered him very often in the seclusion of his cell. The attachment of Dyer to his master and Sabhrai is in sharp contrast to the utter selfishness of Jhimma Singh in the novel.

The way to the reclamation of lost souls lies through suffering and self-denial and Sabhrai meaningfully decided to spend the long cold winter night in the precincts of the Gurudwara in search of the word of God. She passed through the dark night of the soul in the holy place where "the sacred *Granth* lay wrapped on a low cot." As Sabhrai's prayer concluded, the grey light of 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.

The Taylors sent their own official car for Sabhrai's visit to the jail which scared the Anglo-Indian inspectors. The Muslim sub-inspector treated Sabhrai like his own mother. The scene of the meeting of mother and son, Sabhrai and Sher, is movingly described as both "rocked in close embrace with the dog leaping about the cell, yapping and barking joyously."

The gravely agitated and perturbed Sher Singh sought Sabhrai's advice in this matter of life and death. What should he do, he asked? Sabhrai first said that she was only "an illiterate, native woman" and always looked to the Guru for

guidance. What did the Guru answer, asked the agitated Sher Singh?

"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." (*Nightingale* 208-9)

Sabhrani pasted the sacred dust on her son's forehead, blessed him and left.

The Guru's word found a new efficacy in the Christmas spirit generated by Mrs. Joyce Taylor and the order of Sher Singh's release from jail 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 forthcoming it seemed morally wrong to prolong his period of agony and distress. Madan organised a fine reception for Sher Singh, which was an act of atonement for his sins of the past.

The Guru's word thus proved extremely efficacious in the most intangible and incomprehensible manner which baffled all rational predictions. The mystical powers of Sabhrani triumphed

over the worldly, mundane powers of administrators, and in a curious and unpredictable way, good resulted from the interaction of the forces of violence and evil, on the one hand, and humanity and natural justice on the other.

The basic theme as interlinked with symbol in the narrative design, is that of love as a solvent of the problems of life, human, social, cultural and political. "That Love is he that alle thing may bind," Chaucer's exposition of *Cryseyde*, is the essence of the thematic pattern in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. Sabhrani exemplifies the view that "God could not be everywhere and therefore he made mothers." Yet love has limitations imposed by the rigid realities of life which Khushwant Singh portrays skilfully in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*.

Sabhrani seeks the path of love through self-denial and suffering. She redeems the human world around her through death, and in the process endows other characters with sanctity. She embodies the motif of love and is the spirit incarnate of April who "would love infinitely and be loved."

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