

SCENIC PANORAMA RENDERED IN AMRITSAR

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This article primarily concentrates on the description of stationary places and their inner tensions of inhabitants in the novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, written by Kushwant Singh, one of the magnificent writers who made immovable imprints on human heart with his stoic novels. The novel portrays how the immovable place-a rural area in Amritsar determines the destiny of the characters in the novel. Through this article, I would like to spread light to the life rituals, inner tensions, prevailing in a Sikh family of Amritsar during the reign of the British as delineated by Khushwant Singh in his novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*.

The novel *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* deals with the joys and sorrows of a joint Sikh family residing in Amritsar. It also deals with the nationalist movement recording the reactions of many of the characters to the freedom struggle of 1942. The novel, *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, like *Train to Pakistan* is not merely a record of real theme, real characters and real incidents but is more than that, it is creative rendering of the real. This novel gives a panoramic view of contemporary life. This is the story of Sikh family living in Amritsar during World War II. In *Train to Pakistan* it is the violence and heroism of the dacoits are described in vivid terms, but in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*, a deep insight is made into the human psyche that faced trials and tribulations during that period. Hydn More Williams describes rightly:

Khushwant Singh followed it up (*Train to Pakistan*) with a novel that deals with the lure of violence and the paradox of heroism. *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* centres on a middle class Sikh family in the Punjab during World War II. Where *Train to Pakistan* had been all the action, passion and a hymn to the heroism of simple peasants and wild bandits, the new novel was a complex and disturbing study of adolescent psychology. (191-192)

The period of action of the novel is from April 1942 to April 1943, the years during the Second War and just before the Indian Independence. The nationalist feeling ran throughout the country, but in Punjab the response was rather muted. The factors that a sizable number of Sikhs served the Indian Armed Forces under the British regime may have something to do with that phenomenon. Many spirited Sikhs felt keenly that their patriotism was suspect and wanted to make amends. Khushwant Singh takes such a young man as his protagonist and set him against his own father who happens to be a chip of the old block. The ideological conflict between father

and son is domesticated through the interface between the highly-religious mother and the recalcitrant family members.

Buta Singh, the District Magistrate, as a member of the old guard is a very obedient servant of the British Government. He misses no chance to show his loyalty to the British and is also proud of it. He is the proverbial civil servant whose loyalty to the crown is unshakable and who is equally convinced about the necessity of the British continuing in India. His father and grandfather had served in the army, so he continued that distinguished line and like them had mentioned the English King and Queen in his evening prayer to the Guru. His young son, Sher Singh, however is opposed to the British rule and wants to oust them from India. With that objective he has formed a revolutionary group of young boys, whose bravado does not pitifully match their wisdom. The Deputy Commissioner John Taylor learns about their misadventures and waits for chance to take action.

The opening scene of the novel takes us to a rural area in Amritsar where the most important incidents of the novel has taken place. At the outset we see a number of university students engaged in shooting practice. Their intention is to baptize their weapons with blood of some animals. They believe that if they do so they can kill as many English men as they like. The reference to baptism in blood is in conformity with the ancient Hindu custom of dipping swords in goat's blood and laying them before the goddess Durga or Kali. This belief is part of the customs of the people living in Amritsar. Thus through the opening line of the novel itself Singh portrays the custom ridden society, even the younger generation of the people of Amritsar.

The youngsters are under the leadership of Sher Singh. Their intention is to become terrorists, and they want to drive British out of India. The place where they are engaged in target practice is near a swamp. We get a picture of the locality from the following description:

They crossed the stretch of chalky saltpeter and got to the edge of the swamp. There were no birds on the water. On the other side was a peepul tree on which there was a flock of white egrets. Right on the top was a King vulture with its bald red head hunched between its black shoulders. (3-4)

Eventhough Sher Singh is the leader, Madan, son of Wazir Chand is the backbone of the group. He has won his colours in many games and has played cricket for his province. His performance against a visiting English side has made him a local hero. He has brought the other boys with him and would have been the leader of the band except that he knew little of politics. And it is Sher Singh who has arranged the smuggling of rifles and hand grenades from across the frontier. Madan is both Sher Singh's chief supporter and rival. Madan Lal also supports the plan of killing either a deer or a duck. The kids have marched ahead and see a Sarus crane followed by its mate. Sher Singh is unwilling to shoot the crane since he believed that 'if one of a pair is killed, the other dies of grief' (4).

It is the situation which brought up him made him to think so. He is brought up in a traditional Sikh family under the strict guidance of his mother-Sabhrai. She is a deeply religious lady. She prevents him even from keeping a gun because gun symbolizes murder and destruction. So he is not willing to kill a harmless bird. But the other boys sneered at Sher Singh's notion. Provoked by the sarcastic remarks of his friends Sher Singh finally decided to kill the cranes. He pulled the trigger and "the bullet hit its mark. a cloud of feathers flew up and the bird fell in mud"(5). Dyer, the Alsatian dog run after it, and Sher Singh is torn between a sense of remorse and a feeling of pride for accuracy of shooting.

Sher Singh calls his Alsatian dog, Dyer after the name of the General who killed hundreds of Indians in the Jallianwallah Bag in 1919. It shows a typical case-hatred for the English who not only ruled India, but degraded and humiliated the people. Dyer the dog is a symbolic representation of the dumb and mute anger of the Indian masses. The Anglo-Indian policemen fail to subdue him and he gives a better account of his self than his on master. He presents the best in ancient Indian character-the English were agonized by the silent resistance of the masses. They could hardly resist it and left India in order to save their souls. The final departure of English from India does not establish either the goodness or the badness of their intentions; it is a sheer historical inevitability. Dyer carries the spirit of liberty and truth.

He has walked towards the injured bird and put his right foot on its neck. The crane died. This is his first attempt to take life and has succeeded. Sher Singh tries to kill the mate too, but he could not. The mate cries in pain “the anguished cry of the flying crane is almost human” (6).

In the way Jhimma Singh, the village headman has stopped the boys and demanded license for the gun. Sher Singh has shown the license in the name of his father Buta Singh, the senior most Magistrate. When the village head man heard of Sher Singh as the son of Buta Singh, he has changed his tone and praised him. Sher Singh suspecting him as the police informer cleverly introduces his friends under false names. As rightly suspected by Sher Singh and his friends Jhimma Singh is a paid police informer. He has been reporting every activity of Sher Singh and his friends at their village to the Deputy Commissioner.

When the boys are preparing to leave in a jeep, the female crane flew along as if it is in pursuit of its lost mate though at times it seemed to have retreated, “it keep calling all the time” (13).

In his excitement, Sher Singh has forgotten to pick up the six empty cases of bullets from the place of target practice. This opening scene strongly indicates the progress of situation and character of Sher Singh. Later on Jhimma Singh uses these empty cases of bullets to blackmail Sher Singh and extract money from him. He also presented it before John Taylor, the Deputy Commissioner. Thus it finally leads Sher Singh to the nemesis. Thus the novelist has succeeded in presenting the rural beauty of Amritsar in the opening scene itself. The presence of birds and the swamp creates a sense of aesthetics in the mind of the readers. Then the culture and life of the Sikhs in Amritsar are described through the family of Buta Singh.

We have the scenes of the religious ceremonies on the first of the month. Their sacred book, the ‘Adi Granth’, is read and worshipped in temples called Gurudwaras. In well-to-do homes a room is set apart for the Granth and all members read a hymn or two every day. On the birthdays of the Gurus and on the first of every month the whole family gathers and they pray together. Then specially selected passages from the Adi Granth are read and *pershad*-a hot syrupy batter made of flour, sugar and clarified butter- is distributed.

We have one such ceremony on the first of the month on the occasion of the New Year’s Day by the Hindu calendar. All the members of the family are present though Sher Singh is late by an hour to the ceremony. *Sabhrai* starts with the hymn to the spring.

It is spring and all is seemly—
The bumble-bee and the butterfly
And the woodlands in flower.
But there is sorrow in my soul,
For the Lord my Master is away (20)

The poem stresses the absence of husband for his wife. The ceremony ends with a short invocation recited by Buta Singh during which every one remains standing. These ceremonies are strictly practiced even after the death of Sabhrai. They celebrate the first of Phagan in accordance with Sabhrai's wishes. Buta Singh took Sabhrai's place in reading the Granth.

Singh also describes the climate of Amritsar. The chapter IV of the novel reads like a travel brochure. He writes, "To know India and her peoples, one has to know monsoon" (112). Mr. Singh is not contempt to all, "it is preceded by desolation; it brings with it the hopes of spring; it has the fullness of summer and the fulfillment of autumn all in one" (112). All this is beautifully describes and merits narration, but when he says, "Those who mean to experience it should come to India sometime in March or April" (112). It seems Mr. Singh has not forgotten his beauty as a Public Relation Officer and not adjusted to his obligation as a story writer. The writer in his attempt to create an exact atmosphere of monsoon has to cajole his western audience by inviting them to India. He feels they will enjoy and appreciate the rains like the natives only when they suffer the agony of summer.

Nationalism is portrayed in the novel as an expression of violence and irrational behavior. Sher Singh shoots a crane and throws hand grenades at a bridge as a rehearsal for attacking the railway bridges. For both these action they chose the secluded area near the swamp. Their intention is to destroy the means of communication and thereby trapping the Englishmen where they are. The big bridges are heavily guarded and they don't know how to blow up a bridge or how to use hand grenades. Therefore they selected the small bridge built across the canal near the swamp which they selected for their shooting practice. They accept Bhagat Singh, as their leader, who had been hanged twelve years earlier. They don't want the passive resistance practiced by Gandhi. Their intention is to become terrorists. Sher Singh unfolds a piece of paper on which he has written down the instructions and read it. "Let us blow up the little bridge near where you shoot the crane It is in a deserted spot. We can test the power of thee grenades without anyone bothering us"(173). The bridge is ten feet wide and made of red bricks. The thick layer of dried dung shows that it is mainly used by cattle.

He pulled the pin of the grenade with his teeth, counted five, hurled it on the bridge, and sat down. The grenade bounced off the parapet and fell into the water with a loud splash and exploded. It sent a jet of water flying into the air. The next one, thrown by the other boys, exploded on the bridge and sent up the debris all round.... There were big dents in the centre of the bridge and the parapet had been knocked off at several places. (174)

The village headman has known about these attempts of the boys and decided to blackmail them. He also informed it to the Deputy Commissioner Mr. John Taylor. Jhimma Singh demanded three hundred rupees for the treatment of his best bullock, which has broken its leg in one of the holes in the bridge made by the boys. Sher Singh has offered the amount and asked him to the lonely spot near the bridge.

In order to avoid the disturbance of Jhimma Singh the boys have decided to kill him. For killing the lambardar they select the same place which they selected for all their operations. That is for the target practice, for experimenting hand grenades and for the murder. They select this place because:

There wasn't another place within cycling distance of the city which was as desolate as the spot near the little bridge over the canal. For several miles on all sides the land was flat and pancakes. It also looked like a pancake: a stretch of

yellow with a layer of fine powdery saltpetre. Nothing grew on it except bushes of calotropis and thorny saguaro cactus. There was also the marsh. Most of it was a muddy swamp with reeds growing in some places. The only evidence of human life was a footpath along the canal bank which noon³ ever seemed to use, and the little bridge, which it used at all, was probably used by stray cattle. The flat waste of sasltpetre, scrub, and swamp had an eerie loneliness about it. (186-87)

This remote area plays an important role in this novel. It witnesses the great change in the mentality of Sher Singh. At first he is not willing to kill even a harmless bird such as a sarus crane. “Even the sight of a headless chicken spouting blood as it fluttered about had made him turn cold with horror...and had given up eating meat of any kind for some month”(2). But later on he attains courage rich enough to kill even a fellow being. “Madan and Sher Singh covered him with their pistols ‘Put your hands up or I’ll shoot you like the filthy dog you are.’ The head man extended his arms towards Sher Singh as if to embrace him... The head man bent over with a loud ‘Hai’(189).

Then they drag the corpse down the slope towards the swamp. They damp it in to a ditch and covered it with earth and soil. The boys have washed their hands in the canal and left away. Only Sher Singh remains in the city as if he is there to receive his fate. The deputy commissioner respects the hands of Sher Singh in the murder of Jhimma Singh.

The murder of Jhimma Singh cannot be said a patriotic act. The very ideal of patriotism is reduced to a sordid murder which Sher Singh commits to save himself. 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’ (6).

Sabhrai embodies the Indian culture of her time. By Virtue of her moral goodness and deep faith in her religion she becomes the towering figure of the novel. When Sabhrai is at Simla, she receives a telegram from her husband, Buta Singh asking her to return home. The telegram itself makes her think that everything at home is not in order. Intuitively she realizes that something has gone wrong back at home, and it invades her serene and religious world of moral values. On her return, she comes to know about her son’s arrest in the murder case of Jhimma Singh. She at once wants to meet her son in the jail, before that, she reads the Granth Sahib and reads it non-stop. Sher Singh is asked to confess and give the names of his nationalist friends. Buta Singh wishes that he should give the names and gain the Kings pardon this message is to be conveyed by his mother as the pride of father would not allow him to go to the prison. Before going to her on she performs a ritual of purifications. She spends the whole night in the Golden Temple and takes a dip in the cold water in preparation for seeing her son. This ritual is like the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane by Christ. Even Christ required the divine strength to sustain crucifixion and death. It is this similarity in her attempt at renewal that softens Mr. and Mrs. Taylors so much. A peace and calm descends on her.

Buta Singh, Champak and Beena want Sher Singh back home safely. The mother passes the message of the only way to freedom-that is to be faithless to his friends. The path which the Guru has shown her during her sojourn in the temple last night is the real message. Sabhrai says: “She 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” (208). It is this courage and obedience to the voice of truth which heightens her status. She becomes the voice of truth and love. She love Sher Singh but like a good mother she gives him correct advice, though it must give pain and agony.

Sikhism is interwoven in the plot of *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale* and is reflected in the character of Sabhrai. Rosanne Archer, while pointing to some feelings of the novelist, said, "... The book is saved somewhat, however, by an easy style and by the charm and interest of its picture of Punjab land and the Sikh people"(Saturday review Dec 12, 1959). Only the women characters of the novel were religious. In India we find that women are more religious than men. The percentage of religious women is higher than that of religious men in India. It is the tradition and culture of Indians to believe in God a lot. Women in old age become more religious; they spend most of their time in reading holy books, praying to God, attending religious ceremonies, etc. Such a type of woman was portrayed in the novel who was named Sabbrai. She was a middle-aged woman who had a son-Sher Singh, a daughter-in-law-Champak, and is married to Bhuta Singh. She was the only member who held every member of her family together.

Sabhrai, But Singh's wife is the moving spirit of the family. She is a deeply religious lady and the sacred Granth Sahib was the source the source of knowledge and enlightenment for her. Although she is an uneducated lady, she has an extra ordinary, profound and instinctive understanding of life. She feels that God have special concern for the well being of her family. She has deep faith in God and performs all rituals of her religion. Every month she arranges the first of the month ceremony, in which after the reading of the Granth Sahib, pershad is distributed to all the members of the family and servants.

Sher Singh is the only son of Buta Singh and so he has been pampered in his childhood and allowed to have his own way even in grown up stage. He has been praised as the leader of the students. He wants to be benefited from his father's high position of a senior Magistrate. The son uses his father's jeep for his adventure without his knowledge. Buta Singh is provided this jeep for war efforts by the British government. This jeep is being used by a band of terrorists to undermine this effort. Both father and son has different approaches to life-loyalty to British Raj and power, position and money.

As rightly suspected by Sher Singh and his friends, Jhimma Singh, the village head man is a paid police informer. He has been reporting every activity of Sher Singh and his friends at their village to the Deputy Commissioner. Moreover the village head man attempts to blackmail and extract money from Sher Singh. One evening Sher Singh and his friends kill the lambardar. The Deputy Commissioner suspects the hand of Sher Singh in the murder of Jhimma Singh, the village head man.

The Deputy Commissioner issued two warrants one to arrest Sher Singh and the other to search the house of Buta Singh for any explosives. The Deputy Commissioner, Mr. Taylor has special concern for Buta Singh and his family. On his order the police arrest and beat Sher Singh in his own house. The police have not found any explosives. Mr. Taylor guarantees Buta Singh to obtain King's pardon on Sher Singh even if he had committed the murder, but he should confess the names of his accomplice. Sabhrai desires to see her jailed son. The Anglo Indian and the Muslim inspectors treated her like the mother. Sabhrai advised her son no to reveal the names of his friends involved in the murder as it will go against the true spirit of a Sikh.

Mr. and Mrs. Taylors decide to send a Christmas gift to Buta Singh's family by releasing Sher Singh from police custody. In due course Sabhrai had been attacked by double pneumonia and dies of it. Madan, who had gone to Simla with Sher Singh's wife Champak, and sister Beena came back and organized a ceremonial welcome to Sher Singh from the police station. All were

happy and the novel closed with the words of Buta Singh to Joyce Taylor: “thank you, Madam. As a famous English poet has said all is well that ends well” (271).

Madan with his sister Sita, Sher Singh’s wife Champak and sister Beena goes to Simla. In order to escape from the hot weather of Amritsar they go to Simla to enjoy their vacation time. Simla is the capital of Himachalpradesh, a neighbouring state of Punjab. Due to its geographical specialities it has beautiful climate throughout the year.

The reader can visualize the evening seen in Simla from the description:

They walked up the road to the Mashobra bazaar and stopped to survey the scene. Twilight was rapidly singing in to the night. Across a range of hills, the lights of Simla sparkled in stellar profusion all over Jacko Hill. Shop keepers were putting up the shutters of their shops; smoke oozed through the crevices of the wooden planks smelling of wood and spices and tobacco. There were muffled sounds of the hubble-bubble of the hookah ,of coughing and spitting and subdued conversation. The chirping of millions of cicadas was like the deafening roar of a waterfall. (125)

Thus the remote place helps the novelist to portray the traditional beliefs, practices, ways of living of the Sikhs and the picturesque beauty of Amritsar. Amritsar, the cradle of Sikhism and the most revered place of the Sikhs has an indispensable role in the political history of India as well. Punjab, the sacred land which gave birth to many of the great freedom fighters like bhagat Singh has witnessed many massacres that shook the whole of india like the Jallianwallah Bagh Massacre. The border region of Punjab has witnessed man invasions by alien rulers. The Sikhs were used to fight against the invaders. Hence they inherit valour and fighting spirit as their characteristics. So the protagonist Sher Singh and his fellowSikh boys are no exception to possess such courage and fighting spirit. The novelist rightly chooses the locale Amritsar to bring out the various features of Sikhism. Hence it is proved that the locale Amritsar serves as a pivot on which the entire structure of the novel is constructed.

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