

**THE STUDY OF CHARACTERS IN I SHALL NOT HEAR  
THE NIGHTINGALE**

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**Abstract**

Khushwant Singh discusses the loyalties of Sikhs for the British Empire and the nationalists struggle and their desire to hear the voice of Nightingale i.e. the voice of freedom. Khushwant Singh says in the introduction of the novel, “The chief characters in this story are Sikhs”. Though the novel provides less scope for the art of characterization, Khushwant Singh had developed Sabhrai’s character fully. Hers is the only multidimensional character and the rest of the characters are occasionally mentioned according to the requirement of the plot.

**Keywords** – freedom, character, nationalists, Sikhs etc.

**Introduction -**

The story of I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale revolves round a Sikh senior magistrate, Buta Singh, in the Punjab in the Pre-partition days, and his family, and their relationship with the white Deputy commissioners, Mr. Taylor and his wife, Joyce Taylor, another Hindu magistrate, Wazir Chand, his cricketer son, Madan and shy but academically bright daughters Sita. Buta Singh’s family comprises his intensely religious, illiterate wife Sabharai, his sexually inadequate, but politically ambitions son, Sher Singh. Sher Singh’s buxom, beautiful, sex hungry and sexually loose infidel wife champak, Buta Singh’s daughter Beena, maid servant, Shunno, boy servant Mundoo and an Alsatian dog Dyer (He is treated as a member of the family in terms of affection he receives and the services he renders).

**Central Character Sabhrai -**

Sabhrai is the central character of the novel. I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale. Khushwant Singh has developed Sabhrai’s character fully. She is the only multidimensional character. Sabhrai whom Mrs. Taylor affectionately called “Sardarni” is the wife of the first class magistrate Mr. Buta Singh and mother of Sher Singh and Beena. The character of Sabhrai is sparkling and model one which redeems, to a great extent, the casual infirmities in the novel. Given to godly ways, Sabhrai is the hope and mainstay of the family in the moments of crisis. She maintains her cheers even in adverse circumstances and surrenders herself completely to God with an appeal to answer her prayers for the welfare of her family and the release of her son from jail facing the

charge of murder. She sacrifices her life for her son, displaying a true mother's instinct by spending an entire cold night in Gurudwara praying and praying, and true to her faith and belief the prayers are granted as her son is released as a Christmas gift from the Taylors to her family. She is a religious woman par excellence. Her character is fully coloured by Indian shades of feminism. She considers her husband as an ideal and would like to remain in the shadow of her husband throughout her life. Her character is like millions of traditional women who believe "The husband's words are God's words. Neither does she have the room of her own nor does she have an income of her own but of course she has a voice of her own-emphatic and powerful. She has created a specific and important space in her family out of love. Even her husband Buta Singh cannot ignore her voice when she asks him to attend the prayer on the first day of the month in the Hindu calendar. She is not marginalized submissive female character who is at the periphery, but she occupies a central place in the novel.

Sabhrai is always concerned with the welfare of all the family members. As a result of this family concern she worries about her daughter Beena when she has gone to Simla with Champak and Madan. Because of her "Sixth Sense" she often comes to know about the events before it happens. Being a religious minded lady, she respects the entire creation. Though not aware about any environmental problems which we are facing today, such as pollution, population, water crisis and earthquake. She teaches us to respect the law of nature.

#### **Sabhrai and other characters -**

Sabhrai's life is simplicity itself. Hers is a life devoted to her family, looking after the needs and comforts of every member. She finds her own comfort in her worship of her God and Guru and the reading of the Granth, the holy book every day.

Sabhrai keeps the balance in her attitude towards her husband Buta Singh and her son Sher Singh. Buta Singh is at the centre of the action in the novel. Parallel to him but slightly at the margin is the son Sher Singh, who is the leader of the terrorists' revolution for freedom of India from the British rule.

Sabhrai who seeks guidance from her Guru and God. She tells Sher Singh the story of her Guru and how the Guru had sacrificed all his sons for freedom. She does not advise him in a direct way but points out that death is preferable to the betrayal of friends. Ironically, it is Sabhrai who is the real freedom fighter.

Sabhrai is always concerned with the welfare of all the family members. As a result of this family concern she worries about her daughter Beena when she has gone to Simla with Champak and Madan. At the time of crisis like every Indian woman she constantly prays the God to show her right path. She is a religious woman. Nobility, generosity and kindness are part of her personality. She considers her husband as an ideal and would like to remain in the shadow of her husband throughout her life. She has created a specific and important space in her family out of love. Even her husband Buta Singh cannot ignore her voice when she asks him to attend the prayer on the first day of the month in the Hindu calendar. She is not marginalized submissive female character who is at the periphery, but she occupies a central place in the novel.

Buta Singh's piece of information breaks Sabhrai's heart. The course of her life is changed with this news. Her faith in God is put on trial with a perplexed mind she decides to take the shelter in the eternal words of Granth. She goes to Gurudwara in the night and prays God whole heartedly to save her son. At the end, her desire to hear voice of freedom remains

unfulfilled, and she has gone for a long journey. She like a real pativrata asks the permission of her husband to allow her to go.

Finally she becomes one with nature. Her sacred soul merges into eternity. It is a great loss to Buta Singh and his family especially Beena who is yet to get married. Even Mrs Taylor expresses her deep sense of sorrow about Sabhrai's death. After her death Buta Singh and his family decide to follow the path of sabhrai.

### **Conclusion -**

I shall not hear the nightingale is significant for its theme and beautiful description of nature. The time of the novel is pre Independence India. Khushwant Singh discusses the loyalties of Sikhs for the British Empire, and the nationalists struggle and their desire to hear the voice of nightingale. Khushwant Singh says "The chief characters in this story are Sikhs. Khushwant Singh has developed Sabhrai characters fully. Her character is fully coloured by Indian shades of feminism. The Novel has its roots in character and situation. Though the nightingale is central to the story, having double meaning of bulbul in the spring season and also the dawn of Independence, giving a feel of the spring season with the Nightingale singing. Buta Singh has a split personality and as a practical person sails in two boats, while serving the British he maintains his links with the nationalist through his son. His offspring, Sher Singh was on the side of the revolutionaries. John Taylor, Deputy commissioner is altogether is Ignorant of the intentions of Buta Singh. He is infect reveals Buta Singh's real intentions a private conversation with his wife pointing to the fact that Buta Singh's personality and appearance were deceptive. As against all these, Sabhrai heading the household, presents herself as God sent having a premonition at all critical junctures.

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