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FROM MIMICRY TO RESISTANCE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF KHUSHWANT SINGH'S
NOVEL "I SHALL NOT HEAR THE NIGHTINGALE"

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Abstract

The British hegemony, under the colonial era, influenced the lives of Indian people to such an extent that the life styles and languages, modes and manners, tools and techniques, codes of conduct of the British were effortlessly assimilated into their deep consciousness. The Indian were awestruck by the power and authority displayed by British government, but they accepted it as an integral part of their lives, more so sue to its ability to transport them to newer civilizations and power spots and structures. During Gandhian Era, the spirit of Nationalism ushered in a strong passion for the freedom of India. Thus, India became a third space for the enactment of both mimicry of the British culture and resistance against British Empire. Khushwant Singh's novel 'I shall not hear the nightingale' (1959) was set in the year 1942-1943 when the famous 'quit India movement' caused a great political upheaval. A humble effort has been made here, in this research article, to throw a thematic light on the ideological conflict between two streams apparent in the novel-one in which mimicry was dominant, the other in which freedom of India or nationalism was on the topmost priority.

Keywords- Hegemony, assimilation, Gandhian Era, Third space, mimicry, resistance, protest, ideological conflict.

Introduction

Khushwant Singh is one of the most famous writers in Indian English Literature. His novel 'I shall not hear the nightingale' set in 1942-1943 Amritsar, is the most interesting depiction, portrayal and picturization of political upheaval during the colonial era. The novelist has beautifully portrayed how the British political hegemony during the colonial era

affected the lives of the colonized Indians. The novel, aptly a appropriately, shows a contrast or conflict between the politics of hegemony and politics of resistance and protest. The characters, plot and political events provide us with the glimpse of double minded mentality of both mimicry and resistance in Indian people.

Khushwant Singh's novel 'I shall not hear the Nightingale' throws a light on the psyche of subaltern Indians under the hegemony of the British Raj. The novel is a journey from mimicry to resistance of the British rule by the Indian people. The actions and reactions of many of his characters to the struggle of 1942 have a strong ironical bias and prejudice. Buta Singh, a senior magistrate, clings to the British superiors but is worldly wise in maintaining good relations with the Nationalists. Sher Singh, Buta Singh's son, takes an active part in nationalistic revolutionary activities but is not as brave as he is required to be. Shabrai is an old lady who wants to see her country India free of the British control and dominance. An analytical study of major characters show that Indian life was of mingled yarn, both mimicry and resistance. To some people, the British ways of life were comfort zones while to others the British rule was prison bars which they wanted to break in order to enjoy the free air, the free sunlight of the free motherland.

The novel is primarily a "social and human document narrating the story of two families one Sikh and the other Hindu, set against the last days of decaying power of the British colonial rule in Punjab during the period from April 1942 to April 1943, nearly five year before the declaration of independence."¹

The spirit of nationalism provides the colonized Indians with the strong passion for protest and resistance to colonial domination. The subaltern Indian start to consider Europeans or the colonial masters as their common enemies and take pride in cultural codes and conducts of their own nation. The vices of colonial rules such as the loss of individual and collective identity, Physical and mental tortures, the loss of cultural values etc. get exposed in the writing of that era. The pain of colonized Indians is akin to the pain of Noemia De Sousa who, in her poem 'If you want to know me' says:

This is what I am

empty socket despairing of possessing of life

(she however remains 'proud and mysterious African from head to foot')²

The subaltern Indian resistance, though treated ironically, can be apparently noted in the novel. The feelings of colonized and oppressed native get a positive reinforcement from the Gandhian ideology. They start to assert their own identity which is a crucial step in the process of freedom and positive progress as Kancha Illaiah in one of his works argues:

Unless the oppressed learn to hegemonize their own self, unless the culture and consciousness of the oppressed is put forward visibly in public debate. Unless this culture is prepared to clash with the culture and consciousness of the enemy in public, a society of equals will remain an illusion.³

The subaltern Indian people showed their anger against the British Raj, inspired by the 'Quit India movement' launched by Mahatma Gandhi on August 1942. The response to nationalistic movement was rather cold and indifference in some parts of the country. As P. Balaswami says:

The nationalist feelings ran high throughout the country, but in Punjab, rather strangely the response was rather muted. The factor 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 but was not wise enough to know the technique or smart to achieve the desired result.⁴

The first chapter "Baptism of Blood" shows the feeling of strong resistance in the Indian youth who wish to perform a drama 'baptism in blood'. They have a strong desire to free the country from the British rule. They are so swayed by excessive passion of heroism that they converse thus:

"Why waste good bullet on tin cans and frees? What have they done to us?" asked another member of the party. "That is why I say we should have a baptism in blood" repeated the little boy. "We will have our blood baptism when the time comes" replied Sher Singh pompously "Let us be prepared for

action. When duty calls. We will not be found wanting”

“.....” “My gun is thirsty”, went on little boy “If it can’t get the blood of an Englishman or today it must drink that of some animal or bird”⁵

Sabhrai, mother of Sher Singh, is uncertain of seeing the happy days when the nightingale of Indian freedom will Sing, she asks her son:

“Tell me son” she asked, pulling her head on his shoulder. “What will you get if the English leave this country?” I Nothing-But we will be free” “Then what will happen? What sweet meats will we get? Sher Singh could not answer simple questions like these, atleast not in words his illiterate mother could understand. He became lyrical “spring will come to our barren land once more..... once more the nightingale will sing.”⁶

Sher Singh bears a hand with nationalists . He is always ready to take undue advantage of his father’s post, power and authority. He is a highly ambitious nationalistic student leader but he is not same and uniform in words and actions, thoughts and ideals, dreams and realities. He is so much influenced by superficialities that he lives in day dreams of heroic actions and of being national hero. He is so pompous and showy that he shoots a harmless crane and beats or attacks helpless Jhimma Singh , a police spy . But he shows his cowardice when he is beaten by an Anglo-Indian official for being involved in revolutionary activities.

He reveals all secret information, thereby causing a disgrace to the dignity of his family and community. Thus, the character of sher singh has been portrayed with a touch and tinge of irony and satire. However, he is completely, in contrast to his father Buta Singh who has a double faced approach by keeping in with both sides. As he suggests to his son:

Don’t say anything which may cause trouble. Remember my postion. I don’t 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.⁷

Thus, In mimicry of the British rule, Buta Singh represents those Indians who considered their identity and existence well settled and well nurtured under the British rule and empire. The condition of colonized Indians, like Buta Singh, is like Corporal Lestrade in Derek walcott’s famous play ‘Dream on monkey Mountain’ who asks in anguish:

My mind, My mind what’s happened to my mind?

Basil replies: It was never yours, Lestrade.⁸

Buta Singh has a staunch and firm loyalty towards the British Raj and has no reason for the British to be driven out of India. He is convinced about the necessity of the British continuing to rule for the fourfold development of the country. The novelist narrates this fact:

But many besides Taylor had begun to say so and most of Indians were actively agitating for its end. In this state of flux , Buta Singh had decided on a muddle –headed and somewhat dishonest compromise. When he was with English men, he protested his loyalty to the Raj. At my age I cannot change, he would say when he was amongst his own countrymen. He would be a little critical of English ways. He let his own son cast his lot with the nationalists and did not object to his organizing students and making political speeches⁹

Thus, the novel revolves round the conflict between two generations- the older generation who have lived their lives under colonial rules, aping and emulating their attitudes and perspectives and the younger generation who start resistance or protest under anti-colonial spirit. However, The characters, except shabrai, are trapped beneath the web of self-absorption, self-centredness self -interest and deceit. Khushwant Singh has portrayed ironically how the characters resisting the British are hegemonized. The result of such hegemony is that they give consent to the Euro-centric values, assumptions, beliefs and attitudes on the one hand while at the same time accepting centrality, collective individuality and importance of their own cultural values.

Although ,Khushwant Singh has portrayed and depicted the conflicting political commitments very well in this novel, yet he fails to end the novel on a decisive note. A critic makes an analytical observation on the ending of the novel and says:

The novel lacks integrality and organic development, The clash of personalities and political commitments, and the resulting strains on personal relationship, play their own part in the thematic progression of the novel, but what is lacking in spite of the pervasive emphasis on irony and realism, is a quality of cohesion and feeling which is responsible in good art for the transformation of the raw and random into the related and the meaningful. The end is hurried through, Justified by Buta Singh's complacent recall of a pat quote from shakespeare "All is well that ends well"¹⁰

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