CHAPTER V

HOLY MAN HUMANIZED

SHANKARA YOGANANDA
CHAPTER - V

HOLY MAN HUMANIZED : SWAMI YOGANANDA

One comes across a modern holy man who strives a right balance between "the sensuous and the sublime" in Nabin Bhattacharya's A Dream in Hawaii. Yogananda, the protagonist, is a humanised form of the Swami, who is presented not as a dry formulation of yogic concepts, but as a fallible human being with his frailties. This human aspect lends a new dimension to the Swami.

Medley Mukherjee, the Professor of Indian Philosophy, is transformed into Swami Yogananda by the cumulative effect of his own spiritual hunger and the need and desire of Devdani, his student paramour. The garb of a holy man is meant to help him achieve a happy union between the Vedic thought that he teaches and its practical working out in his own life. Handsome and spiritual as he is, he remains thoroughly human throughout. Playing his roles of a teacher and an ascetic with verve and gusto that never let him lapse into a banal and incredible mediocrity.

Swami Yogananda lands in America on the invitation of Stella, a scholar who meets the Swami at 'Sadhana' in Rishikesh and finds her inner balance set right. She feels
that others in America are also in need of such redress. She realises that "within him the East and the West so readily coalesced" and he has a precise idea of Vedanta's relevance to some areas of modern western experience. So, she decides to be the tool of a rich human purpose and persuades Yogananda to undertake a visit to Hawaii. The Swami catches the imagination of his audiences on the U.H. Campus far exceeding the expectations of Stella. Crowds of people and youngesters, in particular, see in Yogananda's discourses on Vedanta a possible cure for the malaise they are troubled by. A pompous culture-custodian, Dr. Vincent Swift, tries to institutionalise Swami Yogananda and proposes the establishment of a Culture Centre in Hawaii.

Swami Yogananda analyses the malady of modern western society by observing men and women around him in America like Dr. Walt Gregson, Dr. Vincent Swift, Frieda, Sylvia Koo and Jennifer. Walt Gregson, the post-professor of Literature, seeks correlations between the portrayal of sex in contemporary American fiction and the real life situations in which he himself is a participant. His

2 Ibid., p. 23.
quest for sexual thrills and orgies leads him from one bed-partner to another. Dr. Vincent Swift, the President of Hawai'i Academy, has his own disease. After the death of his faithful wife, he remains unmarried seeking solace in sexual narcissism and self-release aided by a view of x-rated movies. Frieda and Sylvia Koo are votaries of sexual permissiveness in life.

Observing these men and women, the Swami tries to diagnose the essential causes of their disease. He traces them to the American concept of progress, their acquisitive attitudes and their excessive faith in science and technology. He feels:

Western Society is imperilled by its self-induced vendetta called progress. Implyed in that progress is science destroying as much as it creates. Implyed equally is the loss of humanness. It's hard to evade the question: Is this the death march of Western life? The spiritual nature in Western man - is it lost for all time?³

He observes that the youth in America feel the reality of this menace far more intensely than their elders who still live in the easy assurance of the past ages. Having

³A Dream in Hawai'i, pp. 117-118.
lost their sense of belonging in the mud of the generation gap, youths stand lonely in need of a new promise of security which the established Church has failed to give them. The Swami notices:

The young people in their lostness are in desperate search for emotion based relationship.  

With his powerful argument and personal magnetism, Swami Yogananda casts a spell on youths and impresses upon them the value of the Bhagavadgita's gospel of desireless action to attain "a dynamic equilibrium." He gives them a new value system in the place of money culture and exhorts them to have purpose, belief and hopefulness in their life and strive for God-consciousness. Under the impact of the Swamy, youths like Benjamin and Carol begin to realise the menace of 'lostness' in their lives, understand the meaning of "the dead rat under the nylon run" and identify it with sexual liberation, dollar erase and technological development. They call permissiveness primitive and emphasise the need for 'purpose,' 'Belief' and 'Hope' as the real values for future. Swami Yogananda, thus, succeeds in arousing

---

4A Dream in Hawaii, p. 118.
5Ibid., p. 31.
6Ibid., p. 133.
among the American youths, a desire for deepening spiritual quest:

Such a turn had been beyond his reckoning. The young people vying with each other to pull the Great Society to its knees. They denounced its morbid money making culture listing the types of rottenness in that cesspool. They grieved at a national calamity - monstrous crimes - made tenfold more horridous by being placidly accepted as a habit.  

The beneficial influence of Swami Yogananda's visit may also be found on the people close to him. Jennifer dispenses with sunset affairs and finds a new tranquility. The novelist rightly observes:

He could give her life a direction, a meaning. He could show her how to be free from the void she had been trying to fill, but making it worse and worse.

Dr. Vincent finds anchorage for his subconscious desire for self-projection in his plans to establish the World Centre. Dr. Watt's heavy heart at the departure of the Swami from Hawaii clearly indicates:

7 A Dream in Hawaii, p. 181.

8 Ibid., pp. 42-43.
... a strange conviction that despite all his bitter challenge, he himself was in deeply felt personal need of Swami Yogananda?

The astonishing success of Swami Yogananda with the youths in America, tempts Dr. Vincent Swift to plan the marketing of spiritual experience by institutionalising the Swami in the form of a 'World Centre for Yogic Disciplines,' a five million dollar project. This plan directly brings him into conflict with Swami Yogananda who knows full well that the World Centre can never be a prototype of his 'Sadhana' in Rishikesh, as Dr. Vincent intends the institution to be a super market of spiritualism. The Swami, on introspection, realises that he is tainted by corruption and deviation from his vow of action without desire in his readiness to walk arm in arm with Vincent Swift. So, he resolves the conflict himself by deciding to leave America and thus razing to dust Dr. Vincent's castle of World Centre. The Swami preserves his integrity and spiritualism by scoring a definite victory over Dr. Vincent, a symbol of American materialism.

The irony of the situation is that Swami Yogananda's experiences in Hawaii prove beneficial not only to the people of Hawaii, but also to the Swami himself as he begins to

'A Dream in Hawaii,' p. 244.
understand his own inner sickness. It is under the inspiration of Devjani, his student of Philosophy in Benares, that Prof. Meeloy Mockherjee, the renowned scholar of Vedantism, renounces worldly life and reincarnates himself as Swami Yogananda. The transformation is more a case of "psychological coercion" than real conversion and Meeloy is still reluctant to don the saffron robes, as can be seen from his pitiful cry:

Why am I denied the plain life today of the common man?

In the initial stages of his Swamihood, he finds it difficult to forget Devjani whom he still loves secretly, though, by means of purificatory acts such as fasting and meditation, he, at last, succeeds in destroying his old image of Meeloy and re-creates himself. Despite his commitment to God-realisation, he is not completely free from Devjani fixation. At the subconscious level, the desires for Devjani continues to pester him and the provocative scenes of American life on the Waikiki beach, bring her into his thoughts. On such occasions, he realises that

He was only halfway through the tunnel and still fighting his battle with darkness.


He had to stumble again and again.\textsuperscript{12} The arrival of Devjani from Harvard at the Island of Hawaii brings the Swamy into contact with her again. In India, he had declined to her invitation and admit her to his 'ashram,' but in Hawaii, he does it without her asking for it because he thinks that he can free himself from her grip if she becomes a 'sanyasin.'

That Swami Yogananda is "not a complete fraud,\textsuperscript{13}" is true and his genuine asceticism does assert itself sometimes, just as when he is able to resist Friedla's temptation. He is endowed with rare poise, honesty and sincerity of purpose which are not the attributes of a charlatan. Yet, the fact that the moral fibre in him is not strong enough and that it can be broken at any time, is brought to light by Walt Gregson's attempt to probe into the issues of reality and pretence behind the saffron robe:

He had to strip the holiness off, every shred of it and there must be some way, there had to be some way.\textsuperscript{14}

Here Dhattacharya proves that

\textsuperscript{12}A Dream in Hawaii, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 233.
\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 199.
A Hindu yogi's asceticism is as fragile as bone China.  

Walt sets his mistress Sylvia Koo on the Swami. Wearing a "sari" borrowed from Devjani and with hair done into a thick braid like Devjani's, Sylvia Koo slips into the Swami's bed, rouses Devjani's image in his mind and nearly causes moral fall. It is ironical that Yogananda should suffer exposure at the hands of Walt and his minion and feels the need for atonement just when Walt is undergoing a sea-change:

Swami Yogananda's defeat was, indeed, a defeat of himself. He could not explain the odd feeling, but it was inescapable. Mixed with a sense of guilt, it was sheer anguish.

Stripped off his holiness and of his image as the God-man of India, Swami Yogananda now sets himself on the process of disintegration of his imposter self - the Swami. He performs the 'hardest atonement' by making a confession to Devjani:

You have to know the truth. Swami Yogananda has ceased to exist. This man you see is Neeloy Mookherji. The yellow garb he still

15 A Dream in Hawaii, p. 223.

16 Ibid., p. 227.
has to wear must be discarded. 17

Out of the fire of this ordeal there emerges the sanctified self of Swami Yogananda. He decides to leave America and return to 'Sadhana' to reintegrate his broken image by renewing the spiritual discipline, for, he could not be two persons, Yogananda and Neeloy. It is an irony that he realizes the truth of his inner being which continues to be Neeloy surviving against all outward impositions and control, only when he has acquired fame and is at the zenith of his success as a Swami. As Jasbir Jain rightly opines:

The Swami's journey back to his ashram is a journey of self-realization - a process he begins with his confession to Devjani. 18

Through the character of the Swami Bhattacharya makes us remember that yogic discipline is not a mere ritual, a matter of burning incense or wearing yellow robes or sitting on a deer skin or mouthing inane cliches. Naturally, therefore, the psychic barrier separating the Indian from the American mind, acts as a deterrent to the intimacy of initiation into the secrets of the soul and

17 A Dream in Hawaii, p. 232.

superconsciousness. Swami Yogananda, who discovers in the end that he has not still risen above his love for Devjani, represents the East and the two Americans - Dr. Swift, the organizational man, who wants to use Yogananda as a tool in founding a flourishing spiritual centre and Dr. Gregson, the champion of the permissive society - are intended to reveal two facets of modern American culture. The East-West encounter is abortive because while the East with all its spirituality, has not yet completely mastered the flesh, the West continues to remain commercialised and confused.

Thus, Swami Yogananda serves as a significant image of the East, an embodiment of Advita philosophy and a representative of "the moral puritanism" of India. He is based on two Hindu philosophical ideals - renunciation and 'Sthitapragna' and he seems to be a descendant of the Vivekananda order in his concept of social service in terms of practical programme. Meenakshi Mukherjee's description of Swami in a different context can be applied here:

The Swami functions not as an individual who lives his own life, but as a public figure -

19 A Dream in Hawaii, p. 89.
a fulfilment of certain needs of society. He satisfies the needs of the people who want an object of faith. And the insistence finally appears to be not on the spiritual, but on the social function of the Swami. Swami Yogananda influences the other characters in a benign way and his impact on the youths of the university of Hawaii sounds genuine and healthy. But, at the same time, the Swami realises that he cannot submerge his identity into that of Swami Yogananda. The self-division between Meeloy and Swami Yogananda underlines the basic idea that one should understand the need to be honest to one's inner being. Acceptance of life in totality is essential and this totality is found wanting in Swami Yogananda. Bhattacharya, through this humanised form of the Swami, makes us realize that true spiritualism and salvation can be reached not through self-denial, but through self-fulfilment and self-control, achieving a synthesis of the sensuous and the sublime.