Chapter III

The Triumph of Conscience

While writing *I Shall not hear the Nightingale*, Khushwant Singh seems to have been under the impression that he was improving upon his art and was writing a better novel than “A Train to Pakistan”, which, according to him was a mere documentary. When interviewed by *Mahfil*, Khushwant Singh said, “Now I have no doubt that it is the better novel, although most of the critics say otherwise. This is for the simple reason that the book was at least an attempt to write a novel; it is not a documentary. It is a novel of tensions”. (quoted in Vasant Anant Shahane).

Khushwant Singh’s yardstick is that of artistry. The earlier novel was just a recording of facts, with necessary embellishments. But this work has been more creative, since it portrays the drama between the characters, and within each character, in the form of conflicts. That is what he means by saying it is a novel of tensions. Through the interaction between characters and through the conflict within the characters, Khushwant Singh tries to bring out basic qualities in each individual, the good and the bad, and delineate how those qualities were subjected to evolution through circumstances. What was the end product of the evolution?

Khushwant Singh dedicates the novel to Dharma, ‘who aspires to know’ and follows it up with a quotation from Robert Browning’s “Paracelsus”, which consists of two lines, the first one spoken by Paracelsus, the philosopher, who emphasized knowledge and the second line is uttered by Aprille, a departed poet, who considers love as the only lasting value.

Analyzing the quotation, Vasant Anant Shahane in his work on Khushwant Singh, concludes,
Paracelsus sees the error into which he and Aprille both had fallen; whereas he has excluded love, Aprille has overlooked knowledge; both knowledge and love are complementary approaches to reality. This integral view of human life is the essential implication of Khushwant Singh’s quotation from ‘Paracelsus’, leading to the relevant question whether it is also the implied meaning of the view of life revealed in ‘I shall not Hear the Nightingale’. (Vasant Anant Shahane, Khushwant Singh 105).

The critic’s question is relevant and it is answered in the affirmative by Khushwant Singh through the character of Sabhrai who strides through the novel as a tower of strength based on her love of her family coupled with her love for god.

Khushwant Singh is right in saying that this novel is not a documentary, yet it does not take place in a vacuum, as no novel can. It takes place in the Indian society, in Punjab to be particular, and in a particular period – from April 1942 to April 1943. Hence all the happenings, historical and sociological of Punjab during that period affect the movement of the novel. The author portrays all of them faithfully so that the readers can understand the factors which motivate the characters to act in the way they do. To that extent, this novel is also historical.

This is a story of three families, one a Sikh family, another, a Hindu family and the third an English officer and his wife. The English officer may not have as much of a role as the members of the other families, but we have to take his family as an essential factor since he and his wife play decisive roles in the course of the story. The story starts with a group of boys, who want to become terrorists and give a good thrashing to the British Rulers. Unfortunately, they do not have the grit or the nerve that would go to make terrorists. They are rather flippant, even farcical. Their leader
is Sher Singh, who has taken the trouble to get rifles and hand grenades smuggled. He is interested in politics and is on the side of the nationalists. He imagines that these qualifications will be sufficient to make him a terrorist. His close associate is Madan, a famous cricketer. He is too fun loving to become a terrorist. All the others are boys of various ages.

They are engaged in target practice, shooting tin cans and cardboard boxes, when the smallest boy (that is the irony) suggests a baptism in blood as the ancient warriors used to do. They used to dip their swords in goat’s blood and lay them before the goddess of destruction. If that is done, the boy feels, their guns will never miss the mark. This is an example of tongue in cheek humour, so characteristic of Khushwant Singh.

Sher Singh, though he has assumed leadership, has never killed any creature. He cannot even stand a foul being killed. He is reluctant to carry on this gory ritual, but the others in the party are insistent. Hence, they look for some creature to kill. From this party of boys we can learn a lot about the days. The struggle for freedom was going on in full swing. Though Gandhi’s Satyagraha was followed everywhere, there were no dearth of young men who believed in terrorism. Netaji Subas Chandra Bose was the icon to such youth. Here and there, there were going on shootings of British posts.

Of course not everyone can become a terrorist. There were many like the group here who wanted to become terrorists without knowing its implication. They are not made of the terrorist mettle. That is why they speak of baptism by blood, imagining that the ritual by itself will infuse them with courage and resolve. Their efforts land them in trouble and their leader, Sher Singh, has to bear all the suffering. After this incident, we do not hear of their meeting anywhere else and planning any
act of terrorism till the end of the story. That is the proof that they are no more than being playful. Many such groups of youngsters must have existed at their period, under the impact of freedom struggle and other extremist groups.

When they are looking for an animal or a bird for their baptism by blood, they are attracted by the raucous cry of a Sarus crane followed by another from its mate. The small boy whispers to Sher Singh to kill one of them. The idea does not appeal to Sher Singh. What is the use? Further, how can he kill one of a pair, plunging the other one into grief? Finding him diffident, his friend Madan starts teasing him for his sentimentality. Unless they get used to the idea of shedding blood and steel their heart, how can they carry on their mission? These words from Madan are enough to provoke Sher Singh into action. Stalking carefully and patiently waiting for the right moment, he takes aim and shoots one of the birds at the middle of its body and succeeds in wounding it, to the clapping and shouting of the boys. He is a jumble of emotions of guilt and pride.

The wounded crane manages to drag itself a few feet. The other crane starts flying overhead, all the time crying hoarsely. The boys urge Sher Singh to shoot the other bird too, so that they might be together in heaven or in hell. This idea appeals to Sher Singh. He fills his magazine with six shells and starts fixing excitedly at the second bird, only to miss it. The second bird, grief stricken, chases the jeep for a long time, until the car gets into traffic. The crane and its pathetic cry haunt Sher Singh for a long time, like an albatross figuratively tied around his neck. This is yet another proof that he is too soft a person to become a terrorist.

When they are about to board the jeep they are accosted by a Sikh peasant, who happens to be the village headman, the lambardar. He is overbearing since he has the authority of the British government behind him. The boys suspect that he may be a
police informer, which, in fact, he is. That was common in those days since it was a sure way to carry favor with the policemen on the one hand, and intimidate the natives on the other. He demands to see their rifles licenses. Sher Singh shows his father’s license, wrapping it with a five rupee note. Madan reveals Sher Singh’s actual identity to the peasant, that he is the son of the magistrate, which changes the attitude of the lambardar, who starts cringing.

Sher Singh, on his part, introduces his companions including Madan, with false names. He is, however, worried that his identity has been revealed to the headman. Madan reassures him that nothing wrong would happen to him. Further, otherwise the lambardar would not have let them go. When they cross the gate on the canal road, their attempt to enter a wrong number as the jeep’s fails, and the correct number has to be entered. Madan, the son of another magistrate, takes stock of the situation and says that all that the lambardar knows is that Sher Singh has a gun, for which there is a license and he has used his father’s jeep. Nothing more has been revealed. This gives great relief to Sher Singh, who gets into a mood to celebrate. All that he can think of is urinating with swear words.

“He pulled up the jeep. ‘I’ve had too much tea,’ he announced. ‘I will dedicate its remains to the lambardar and the gateman’.

They roared with laughter and leaped out of the jeep. They lined up along the deserted road. ‘On the headman,’ said one.

‘On the headman, all informers and all Englishmen’.

‘No’, said the smallest body, ‘mine is for the Englishmen’s Memsahibs.’ They laughed louder and continued for a long time.

(ISNHTN. 12)
This incident which shows the youngsters at their most irreverential moment, reveals the attitude of the young men of the days. The elders, out of their past habit, continue to respect the British officers. Some of them even come forward to defend them. But the freedom struggle under the leadership of Gandhi has involved even the common folk in it, and the British are no more held in esteem by the youngsters, who have realized that they are not the rightful rulers of the country. They do not mind ridiculing them in their absence. One important fact none of them realizes at that time is that they have left empty cartridges at the sight, which form the evidence of the shoot-out that has taken place.

After dropping everyone else, Sher Singh takes the car home, safely hides the rifles and the hand grenades in the garage and enters his house with his father’s shot gun. Even now he is haunted by the cranes, the one he killed for no reason, the other crying for its mate. Further, he is assailed by doubts and fears. Will the headman report him to the police and the police to the Deputy Commissioner? His father, Buta Singh, enjoys the trust of the Deputy Commissioner more than any other officer in the district. His father’s career has been exemplary and at present he is putting in the best of his efforts for the furtherance of war efforts. It is for this purpose that the government has provided him with a jeep. And Sher Singh has used it for his rifle training as a prelude to his fight against the government, which would destroy both him and his father. If it is known to the Deputy Commissioner, Buta Singh will not continue get the same recognition that he is getting now.

Sher Singh has never thought of all this until now. He has been naïve enough to believe that he will manage to get the best out of both worlds, that is, his father would continue as a senior magistrate offering him security, and he would reap encomiums as a heroic leader of terrorists. He realizes now that it is just impossible.
He feels depressed now. He takes a fresh look at his house now, and thinks of the security and comfort it offers. He is happy to hear the familiar sounds. Compared to it, the world outside looks dark and lonely. This was how many young men felt in those days. They were carried away by the slogans of the freedom fighters. They were thrilled by the exploits of the terrorists. They too wanted to do something like that. But they were not prepared for the sacrifices it entailed. They were not ready to undergo the hardships of a fighter’s life.

Sher Singh is received by the family and until going to sleep he enjoys the warmth and affection offered by its members. His mother, Sabhrai, treats him like a child. She chides him for taking away his father’s car without informing him. She finds nothing wrong in his taking away government’s car, only he should ask his father. And his father wants the shot gun and the license to be transferred to his own name before he uses them for hunting. She assures herself that her son has not done any killing, since taking the life of an innocent creature is a sin. Before he retires to bed, she asks his wife to take care of him and press his head.

Sher Singh prefers sleeping in the open while his wife wants privacy. Her demands for sex are incessant. He tries to meet her demands as much as is possible for him. He has a look at all the trophies he has collected, all emblems of strength. There must be more than a dozen of them. And, how bad that he is upset by the simple killing of a bird! He tries to recover his faith in his own courage. He tries to seek solace from the fact that not much can be revealed by the headman. He little realizes that these two are incompatible.

He is assailed by nightmarish dreams, which show him being chased by trains that try to run over him. He wakes up with a cry of terror and looks around for his wife. He wants to assure himself that he is not alone. She is snugly asleep, her sexy
self. “She lay like a nude model posing for an artist; one hand between her thighs covering her nakedness and the other stretched away to expose her bust”. (18)

The following day happens to be the New Year’s Day by Hindu calendar and the house wears a festive look. There is a temple in the house where the entire family is expected to be present. Sabhrai, the stern housewife that she is, is extremely religious and puts all her faith on the Almighty Guru. It is she who presides over such occasions. Sabhrai, who has been reading the Granth quietly, chides her son for the delay. Actually the words are meant for his wife Champak. Is it not the duty of a woman to take care of things on such a day? What can menfolk do, with various duties distracting them? It is the woman who must remind the man of such ceremonies and see to it that he is present on time. This has been the attitude of the society for centuries and this will continue until when, one cannot say. Sabhrai has been doing it for her lifetime and she expects her daughter-in-law to behave in such a way. Thus, with a little stroke here and there, Khushwant Singh paints a full picture of social norms regarding womenfolk as observed in those days.

Usually when men took care of worldly and mundane affairs of the family, it fell to the lot of women to take care of spiritual affairs. They meticulously took care of each ceremony and each ritual in detail. This is what is happening in Buta Singh’s household. When Sabhrai presides over the entire ceremony as if she were a goddess incarnate, she is only being true to the tradition. To that extent, the novel reflects the sociological history of the days.

Being a strong willed woman, Sabhrai is able to command respect from each member of the family. She starts reading from the Granth, at the end of which Buta Singh invokes the Guru. Prasad is brought and distributed to all the members of the family including the Alsatian. Then Sabhrai closes the Granth and lets it open on its
own. It might open on any page at random. The idea prevalent among people of all
religions in India is that nothing ever happens at random, without God’s will. So,
when the Granth opens itself on a page, everybody believes that God has chosen the
page as the relevant message for the family. What is happening here is common for
the whole of India. It may be taken that Khushwant Singh records the social history of
India through such incidents.

Sabhrai is a bit nervous to start with, lest any misfortune should be predicted
in the page. Having assured herself that there is no such forboding in the page, she
goes through it in a calm and clear voice. Whenever such a passage is read, every one
present listens to it fervently and tries to connect it with problems that were
uppermost in their minds. Sher Singh finds in the passage an assurance from the Guru
that no misfortune would befall him.

Buta Singh gets ready to go to his office. The meal is ready to be served and
Buta Singh starts scanning the newspaper. Sher Singh wonders whether his father
would ask him about his taking the government jeep for a private outing, and is
relieved when his father starts making general comments on politics. Khushwant
Singh seems to be suggesting that even such nervous youngsters started speaking of
revolution and terrorism, influenced by what was going on throughout India.

Going through the newspaper, Buta Singh observes that the British are not
far ing well in the war, having been driven out of Burma and having been trounced in
Africa. Sher Singh is usually noncommittal while talking politics to his father. But
now he insists that Indians must be thinking of what is happening to their own country
rather than worrying about what is happening to others. Buta Singh takes it as a
personal snub. He feels that the interests of the Englishmen and those of the Indians
are identical. He feels that the British rulers have treated Indians well.
The conversation goes on. The father and son are seriously discussing the politics of the day. Though they are seemingly on equal terms, there are some reservations. The son, though interested in politics and having strong opinions on matters of national interest, is not forthcoming in expressing his views. He is extremely cautious lest his father should feel offended. The father, on his part, does not take difference of opinion easily. He feels that his son has snubbed him. And it is he who should have the last say. It is the prerogative of the father. This is how father-son relations were till almost the end of the twentieth century and Khushwant Singh creates a fictional situation with fictional characters to record this historical fact. It is a piece of drama that is enacted. Khushwant Singh is at his artistic best while portraying such scenes.

Then Khushwant Singh goes on to record the change of attitude that has come over officers like Buta Singh who have been serving the British with utmost loyalty. Khushwant Singh says:

…… loyalty to the Raj had been as much an article of faith with him as it had been with his father and grandfather who had served in the army. He, like them, had mentioned the English King or Queen in his evening prayer… Then things had begun to change. Gandhi had made loyalty to the British appear like disloyalty to one’s own country and traditions”.(25)

Buta Singh and the officers were made to feel ashamed of themselves. They are treated as servile creatures given to sycophancy. Added to that is the attitude of a new brand of Englishmen coming out to India. In the past, the officers were grim and stern and kept a rightful distance. They were conscious of the difference between the rulers and the ruled. To them the Indians were natives, inferior in every respect. On
the other hand, in recent years, the attitude of the English officers has changed. It only reflects the change of times. They are aware that the days of colonialism are coming to an end and they have no right to treat the natives as inferior. They tried to befriend them.

Unfortunately, the Indians were not prepared for such an attitude. Indian society was made of hierarchy. The officers can never be equal to the subjects. All these historical facts are excellently captured in Khushwant Singh’s narrative. Buta Singh, the other magistrates and Taylor may be fictional characters. But each one of them represents a person or a group in real life.

It was only during that period, in the nineteen forties, that people started talking about the end of the British rule in India. Till then it looked as though it was perennial. Nobody ever thought of change of governments. The likes of Buta Singh thought that the British rule was permanent and they never thought of any need for bringing it to an end. But after the freedom struggle became more intense, even the Englishmen started thinking of leaving India. They were only being realistic. They knew that no country could be ruled against the will of the people. In the British parliament, there arose voices which insisted on quitting India. But people like Buta Singh could not understand such subtleties. For them, government meant the British government and nothing else. So, when a representative of the British government himself started talking of leaving India, it was but natural that Buta Singh suspected the sincerity of his words. When he realized that the English officer meant what he said, he considered him an oddity.

Even he was not unaware of the tides changing. Instead of wholeheartedly acknowledging it, as old habits do not change easily, Buta Singh had decided on a muddle headed and somewhat dishonest compromise. When he was with Englishmen
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 son cast his lot with the Nationalists and did not object to his organizing the students and making political speeches (26).

This passage on Buta Singh brings out how loyal officers of the day felt about the transition that was taking place in the field of politics. He had grown too rigid to bend. So, he became what others called ‘double-faced’. He permitted his son to be a nationalist because he must find his place in independent India. Lest Taylor should mistake this as an anti-government act, he tells Taylor that his son is of ‘your way of thinking.’ How clever! How cunning! Yet this behavior seemed to be natural to Buta Singh as he could not behave otherwise. Through his characterization, Khushwant Singh paints a picture of how loyal elderly officials felt at that time, when India was slowly and somewhat hazily preparing itself for the independence.

After the brief colloquy with his son, and having finished with his meal, Buta Singh gets ready for his office. Then there is a comic interlude, a very brief one. When he is drying his hands and mouth with the towel, a bit of curry sticks to his moustache. “A bulbul on the bough”, says Sabhrai. Buta Singh’s attempt to wipe the curry away fails. So, his wife says, “still on the bough”, Now Buta Singh is able to brush the particle off. The entire family says, “It has flown”, in a chorus and bursts out laughing. Khushwant Singh remarks, ‘The atmosphere changed to one of hilarity’. (27).

This small interlude shows how well knit the family is. It is necessary because they all stand together in the moment of crisis, when Sher Singh is taken to prison on suspicion of murder. Further, such scenes show Khushwant Singh as an artist, and not
a mere chronicler. He can make the family behave in a natural manner, not in a contrived fashion.

The magistrate has no time to go to the temple as he is waited for in the office of the Deputy Commissioner. All magistrates will have to be on duty since on such festive days there is the danger of Hindu-Muslim riots. When Beena wants to go to Wazir Chand’s house, to work with Sita, Sabhrai’s intuition seems to give her a warning signal, though it is brushed aside by Buta Singh, who is feeling affable at the moment. We are not very sure whether Sabhrai had any inkling of the lecherous nature of Madan, but it is possible. This is an excellent artistic touch by Khushwant Singh since it reveals the intuitive nature of the strong woman Sabhrai. This intuition no doubt is the result of her observation and experience. When Buta Singh says, ‘Let her go to Sita’s,’ it was accepted by everyone. “Buta Singh’s word was never questioned” (28) observes Khushwant Singh. That was the practice in all families. In the patriarchal family system in India where the elders are worshipped as god, the word of the head of the family is never questioned. It is a comment on the family system as it existed till almost the end of the twentieth century.

All the magistrates are assembled in the verandah of the Deputy Commissioner’s house, in response to his summons. They are a bit sore as it is the New Year day. Wazir Chand asks Buta Singh if, as the senior most magistrate, he would tell the Deputy Commissioner not to disturb them on religious holidays. His tone is irritating to Buta Singh. Was he trying to show that Buta Singh was not that important a person, after all?

For Buta Singh this is the occasion to show off and also put his colleagues in their place. He says he has given a bit of his mind to the Deputy Commissioner on another such occasion. But the trouble is, there is no unity among the magistrates.
When he says one thing to the boss, another goes behind his back and says something else. This is a reflection on how the Indian officers behaved with their English bosses. There was an unhealthy, even unholy, competition among them in currying the Englishmen’s favor. They never hesitated to betray their fellow officers. Unity has never been their strong point. This is what Khushwant Singh points out here. This is part of history. And it has been revealed in an artistic manner, in the form of conversation among magistrates.

Deputy Commissioner Taylor sends only for Buta Singh. Taylor starts the conversation in an apologetic tone since he has called them on a festival day. Buta Singh assures him that they do not mind in the least because they all know the seriousness of the situation. Taylor tells him that while they do not anticipate any trouble on the day, even a small incident might cause a major riot.

Taylor discreetly brings up the subject of Buta Singh’s son, like an intrusion. He says that he has been informed by the Superintendent of Police that his son has organized a meeting. Taylor has told the officer that Buta Singh’s son could be trusted whatever his political affiliation might be. Buta Singh assures him that he is just like all young men of the days. Yet, he will never cross the boundary line.

In this exchange, we find that Taylor is a symbol of tact and decency. In these few seemingly harmless words he has conveyed to Buta Singh that he is fully aware of his son’s activities, and he expects the magistrate to put a rein on them. There is also the threat that his son might get himself into a crisis if he is not careful. When Taylor asks him to be with him at the Sikh fair, Buta Singh jumps at the opportunity of being seen in the Deputy Commissioner’s company by the entire Sikh population of the city. His popularity will soar. Just as a parting gesture, Taylor assures the magistrate that his excellent work towards war efforts will be rewarded, which means
that his name will be inducted in the Honors list. Buta Singh is elated no doubt. When he goes out of the officer’s room, he tells his colleagues with a smile that he has got a holiday for them, by way of showing off.

The narrative shifts to the residence of Wazir Chand, a fellow magistrate, who is a Hindu. While Buta Singh’s house has a temple where there is deep religious fervor, Wazir Chand’s family is not so concerned with religion and ritual. There is a large portrait of Krishna which is garlanded once in away. Khushwant Singh says that the real ‘god’ in the household is the son Madan Lal, not very bright in his studies but a famous cricketer. He is pampered by everyone and does not fail to take advantage of it. We meet him first in company with Sher Singh and a group of young men who want to become terrorists. Actually Madan is too fun loving and too easy going to become a terrorist. It only shows that it was a period when the nationalistic spirit had permeated to every level of the society. Words like “fight”, “battle” and “terrorism” must have been in everyone’s lips. This fact has been recorded by the author in the opening scene of the novel. It is certainly ludicrous to think of Madan as a terrorist.

Beena, Buta Singh’s daughter feels very much at home in Wazir Chand’s house, and addresses everyone as a relative. Madan comes home after completing his practice and starts playing with his child. Beena picks up the child and covers him with kisses. Madan greets her casually and then informs her where everyone else is. His manner is theatrical as he tries to please Beena. Madan’s wife Lila is sick in bed, but Madan does not care a bit about it.

Madan offers to take them to a movie. Lila excuses herself citing her sickness. What happens in the cinema later makes one wonder whether Madan planned to go to the movie since his wife was unwell. Beena is conscience stricken regarding going to the movie because her family considers it a sin, unlike Wazir Chand’s family for
which it seems to be a routine affair. Her mother, the stern disciplinarian that she is, will take her daughter to task if she comes to know of it.

Khushwant Singh presents a Sikh family and a Hindu family and makes a comparative study. They are both equal in social status since the heads of both families are magistrates. Both Sher Singh and Madan Lal are ambitious young men in their own way and both are fun loving. Both are interested in the affairs of the nation as any young man in that period would have been. The girls, Beena and Sita are studious, obedient and reticent as any girl in similar circumstances would have been. At the same time, there is an essential difference. The Sikh family exudes religious fervor while for the Hindu family religion is very superficial. While Buta Singh and his pious wife follow the tenets of the Granth at every step of their life, Wazir Chand’s family does not offer any special worship even on a New Year day. On the other hand they make use of the occasion to watch a movie.

By making a comparative study of the two families and creating so many parallels between the two, Khushwant Singh gives us a glimpse into the social history of the days. The families are fictitious no doubt, but a look at the cast of characters reveals how painstakingly he has created them with so many parallels. For each one in one household, there is a replica in the other. The similarities between each pair as well as the differences are carefully painted so as to enlighten the reader on the way in which Sikhs differed from Hindus of the period.

When they reach the cinema, Madan is attended on with special care. He is the son of a magistrate and his family was entitled to these privileges. “Besides, he was the son of a magistrate; and magistrates, policemen, their friends and families, had privileges which go with power”, records Khushwant Singh. (38) The manager comes
to them fawning like a dog. He refuses to accept the money, seats them in the VIP box, offers snacks and drinks.

Even small things are recorded by the author with extraordinary care. Look at this paragraph:

The lights were switched off and the cries of hawkers of betel leaves, sweetmeats, and sherbets, and the roar of hundreds of voices died down. First came a series of colored slides advertising soaps, hair oils and films that were to follow. The literate members of the audience read their names in chorus. Then the picture started and the few recalcitrant talkers were silenced by abuses loudly hurled across the hall.” (38-39)

Khushwant Singh captures the behavior of the audience in such detail so that the readers can get an idea of the behavior of the movie goers of the day. He records every detail with the thoroughness of a movie script writer.

As soon as the lights go out, Madan starts his flirtatious activities, with utmost caution, taking into account the freshness of Beena and how unprepared she is for such a behavior. It must be conceded, however, that she has also been attracted by Madan Lal’s looks and manners. Madan’s hand touches the girl’s elbow, in such away that it may be taken to be accidental. During the intermission he is at his gregarious best while talking to her. He starts praising her brother to the skies, and in turn is profusely complimented for his prowess in the cricket field. Then he makes a natural deviation to her own figure, which, according to him, is athletic. When the lights go off, he puts his hand on the arm of Beena’s chair, deliberately, and the act, instead of
making her feel repulsive, flatters her, in spite of her strict religious upbringing. The memories of this experience linger in her heart throughout the day and the night.

From the cinema, the scene shifts to the venue where Sher Singh’s meeting is to take place. As is his wont, Khushwant Singh records every little thing that happens there. The Students’ Corps present in the uniforms impresses the Sikh peasants who have come there in large numbers. Then there are the volunteers from the Nationalist and Communist Parties in their slovenly outfit. They start playing film songs over the microphone and gradually switch on to martial music. Volunteers parade up and down keeping step with the military march. All these things are carefully noted so as to present the readers with a clear picture of the day, and the mood of the youngsters. Their nationalistic feelings seem to be real. Khushwant Singh notes: “Then Sher Singh arrived, like a Field Marshall coming to inspect his troops”. (42). There is the ceremonial saluting and the unfurling of the flag by Sher Singh, who takes the salute at the march past before starting his address which is eagerly awaited. All these things go to his head and all fears and anxieties recede to the background.

All the same, he does not forget that everything he utters on the platform will be reported to Taylor and that the police enjoyed the powers to arrest and detain anyone. Yet, he works towards extracting applause from the audience. He condemns the Communists and follows it up with a condemnation of partitionists. When these failed to produce the much desired applause, he raises his voice and makes a heroic proclamation that they would destroy all their opponents. It works. There is a roar of applause from the gathering.

It was a period when there were young leaders emerging all over India, taking Gandhi, Netaji and Nehru as their ideals. In fact, talking of nationalism became the fashion of the day. There were some who were prepared to risk their well being on the
altar of the nation; but there were many like Sher Singh who were cautious in their approach. They were not prepared to sacrifice their future. Khushwant Singh portrays this part of Indian history, through Sher Singh, a fictional character, who is a type, rather than an individual. When Sher Singh goes to Madan’s house to inform him of the meeting, he learns that Madan has gone to the cinema with Sita and Beena, which somewhat upsets him.

Khushwant Singh indulges into a long harangue on the absence of privacy that pervades all life in India.

Absence of privacy is a phenomenon that pervades all life in India, urban and rural, of the rich and the poor. It has been so, for many centuries and weight of tradition is heavy on those who live in society and still wish to be alone. Rooms of Indian palaces seldom had any doors and those that did could seldom be bolted from inside … the most intimate of relationships could apparently be consummated and enjoyed under public gaze. Examine any old painting depicting a love scene. There will be the prince and the paramour in different stages of disarray – one of his hands on her bosom, the other holding the pipe of his hookah. Standing by will be the female servants fanning away flies, sprinkling scented water, or serving wine. In the background there will be a party of musicians and singers” (45-46)

Continuing on the topic, Khushwant Singh points out that even in the twentieth century, after westernization, things have changed little. In the joint family system, everything must be done together. According to him, it is such demands of the joint family system which compels many Indians to renounce life altogether and become hermits. This may be his personal opinion, but it has been inferred from his
keen and exhaustive observation of Indian life. In such passages he shows himself as a social historian recording facts and inferences arrived at as a result of years of study and introspection.

Another consequence of the absence of privacy, according to Khushwant Singh, is that the art of love is practically unknown. That this must be the case in the land of Kamasutra is a fact which he has lamented on many an occasion. As a result, the sex act, which must carry the couple to the pinnacle of pleasure has become soulless. In a land where women have always been advised to practice self abnegation, a woman always considers sex as an unpleasant sin which she must commit to please her husband; women seldom get fulfillment in sex. Khushwant Singh observes half mockingly and half painfully that to the mass of Indian womanhood the sixty-five ways of kissing and petting, the thirty-seven postures of the sex act so beautifully portrayed in stone on temple walls make as much sense as the Greek translation of the treatise Kama Sutra itself. Unfulfilled sexual impulse results in an obsession with sex and in many perversions which result from frustration: sadism, masochism, and most common of all, exhibitionism. (47-48)

Having made this observation as a candid social scientist, Khushwant Singh goes on to present a woman character, a fictitious character, which is an excellent example of the frustration mentioned by him. In such characterization where there is a fusion of fact- historical fact and fiction, Khushwant Singh reveals himself as an excellent artist–novelist.
Champak prefers to be at home, confined to her bedroom – one piece of luxury she has been granted on account of the westernization of Buta Singh’s family – so that she can afford to be as eccentric as possible, the behavior, which is much to her liking. Khushwant Singh, as usual, describes every movement made by Champak in graphic detail, as if he is showing a slow moving video show. After sulking in her room for some time listening to her ever blaring radio, she asks the servant Mundoo to bring the hot water when it is ready.

Champak goes into the bathroom with a shaving set. She does not bother to close the door since Mundoo is just a servant and it will be in order to ignore his presence. When she comes back to the bedroom, stark naked, and standing in front of the mirror, she starts admiring her body from every possible angle. She studies her face and figure in all the postures she had seen in the photographs of nude models. What she sees in the mirror is to her satisfaction. When she tells the servant to bring the hot-water, he carries the water to the bathroom with great difficulty. When he enters the bathroom, Champak is totally nude, and chides him for entering without knocking. Sher Singh comes home in the evening bristling with news of his successful meeting. She complains regarding Mundoo. Sher Singh starts speaking in the fashion of platform oration, bringing out the miserable condition in which all servants find themselves in. They are both too engrossed in themselves to show any interest in the other.

Champak is impatient to have sex and throws one hint after another, which are never picked up by her husband. Somehow she manages to have sex with him though he is hardly in the mood. Now, what is the purpose of Khushwant Singh in creating the character of Champak? He has already given an elaborate account of the Indian conditions which do not permit the average Indians, rich and poor alike, to have
satisfactory sex. The act is indulged in mostly for procreation and to think of pleasure is considered sinful. This leads to many unwanted results of which Khushwant Singh has given an elaborate account. After theorizing in detail, he presents Champak as a case study. She is a fictitious character, serving as an example for how a number of healthy women suffered on account of the artificial modesty imposed on them.

India has once experimented with sex act and come out with elaborate recommendations for deriving the maximum pleasure out of it. Sex is meant to be a pleasurable act and there is no place for any inhibition. Unfortunately, after the entry of Islam, unwanted modesty and reticence were introduced, making people feel guilty. When Victorian prudery made its entry into India, people adopted it into to, and sex became a dirty act. This is the opinion held by many thinkers and writers, both Indian and foreign. Khushwant Singh subscribes to this view. Women in particular were brought under rigid control. They were told how to stand, how to sit, how to talk, what dress to wear, how to receive guests, how to behave in the presence of strangers and so on and so forth. They were seldom permitted to move out. The result was perversions as Khushwant Singh has already recounted. It is in this context, that he presents Champak as a case study, illustrating how prudery has affected her.

She is a girl from an affluent family and is married into a family where there is no want of comforts. She has pretty little to occupy herself with. Her mother in law, though full of concern for her, is not prepared to move with her on friendly terms. Her husband is always away, concentrating on self advancement, and never even tries to understand her. She has nothing to do except listening to cheap radio music.

She seems to have narcissus complex and never stops admiring her own looks. Khushwant Singh elaborately describes how she admires herself, standing in front of the mirror. And her finding fault with Mundoo is unwanted. She enjoys teasing and
titillating him. May be, there is a mild sadistic streak in her nature. Unfortunately all
the hints thrown are wasted on her husband who has neither the time nor the
inclination to understand the needs of his wife. It is but natural that all this leads her
into lecherous relationship with another man.

Then the scene shifts to the Sikh temple where the mile long procession
reverentially carrying the holy book comes to an end. There are only a few people
there to welcome it, among whom is Sabhrai, one of the most pious and most stoic
women of the city, in company of her inseparable maid Shunno. They start walking
towards home. The street is deserted, since it is past midnight. Then they pass through
the prostitutes’ quarters. The author gives a description of the girls, of the songs and
dances going on there. This is done perhaps to give a full picture of the society as it
existed, with the unavoidable seamy side.

Shunno is fond of gossiping and she waits for the right opportunity to open the
topic of the day. She hints that Madan has ‘other habits’ than playing cricket and
going to the cinemas, and his wife is unhappy with him. Though Sabhrai brushes this
aside, Shunno is right, though how she got the information is not known. It only
shows that every person is being watched by the society.

This piece of information, however, is not entirely new to Sabhrai. But she
does not want to upset the family. The families have come so close owing to various
reasons. All that she can do is put her faith in God. Khushwant Singh records this in a
half mocking tone.

She had infinite faith in the Guru and was sure of his special interest in
her husband and children. He has helped her husband to rise to the
position of senior magistrate. He would no doubt get her Sher to settle
down in a steady occupation and find Beena a nice husband, not necessarily rich, just well off, but a good Sikh with his hair and beard unshorn ….. Sabhrai shut her eyes and invoked His blessings for her family with all the fervor she could command (58)

What does Khushwant Singh try to convey? That her unflinching faith has made her too simple and too credulous? It is possible. But he has characterized her as a rock like lady who could weather any storm owing to her faith. This passage shows to what extreme stages her faith can take her.

Buta Singh returns home after completing all his chores as a magistrate and has a nice time with his family. He makes a lot of show off, bragging about his close relationship with Taylor. The family does not take all his narrations too seriously. When it is Beena’s turn to talk to him, she tries to bring up the subject of having gone to cinema, but is abruptly interrupted by Buta Singh himself. Then he brings up the topic of Sher Singh’s meeting and gets the assurance that his son has not said anything indiscrete. This interlude shows how well knit the family is.

So far, Khushwant Singh has introduced the two families in detail. Both are of the same standing in society, their heads holding the same position. Both have impetuous youngsters. Only Madan’s wife is docile and reserved when compared to the insatiable Champak. Sabhrai, Buta Singh’s wife is unique, with her strength of personality based on unswerving faith in the ways of Guru. We also know their ambitions, inclinations, personal traits and weaknesses. Through these, Khushwant Singh has managed to give the social currents and cross currents that existed in the days. We also come to know of the social mores, traditions and habits of the days.
If Champak can be treated as one type of case study, Shunno the maidservant can be treated as another type. Widowed at a very early age, before she could have a full taste of marital bliss, she was forced into a celibate life. Without even enjoying normal pleasures allowed to women, she tried to derive happiness in slaving herself to Buta Singh’s family. If she tried to sublimate her pent up libido in working like a donkey, she had not fully succeeded in her attempt, and some libido was still left craving for an outlet as coming events would show.

A rustic by birth, she remained a rustic even in the civilized society of a city. Every night she leaves a jug of water with a brushing twig in it and takes it with her for washing after her chores in the open air toilet. Her day starts even before day break. Here is how her robust health is described by the author:

Although she was fat and nearly fifty, she could work fourteen hours a day without any sign of fatigue. She had never been known to be ill … Her eyes were clear, with the white and black whiter and blacker than other people’s. She had even row of teeth not one of which had ever given her trouble. She could chew up six feet of sugar-cane at a time. She could crack almonds and walnuts as if her mouth had been fitted with a nut-cracker. (62-63)

She likes bossing over the servants until they run away from the household. The only person who stays on was the near adolescent Mundoo, who exhibits enormous forbearance in spite of his age, or probably, because of his age, he may not have many places to choose from once he leaves the household.

Mundoo has his own way of taking vengeance on the woman who is becoming his nightmare. He impishly adds red paint to the brass jug of water and has a hearty
laugh at the discomfiture of the old woman. When, one day, Shunno felt something on her left hand after washing her private parts, and it was red in colors she felt that something was seriously wrong with her health, which was but natural. She felt extremely weakened and the feeling seriously hampered her movements.

When Shunno does not show herself for the first of the month worship, everybody is concerned, including Buta Singh. Only Mundoo, who knows the secret, is unconcerned. Sabhrai brings up the topic of Beena’s impending examination and Sher Singh’s nomination to the University union. She concludes that all this calls for fervent prayers and decides upon a complete reading of the Granth Sahib. She is not for hiring a professional reader. They have to help her. It is Sabhrai’s way of imposing religion on them since all of them took it easy. This shows her firm faith in God and prayer. India has always been proud of women with faith and forbearance. Khushwant Singh’s presentation of her shows that she is a type. To that extent, history has been fused into fiction. We come to know of innumerable women of the days who chose to suffer for the welfare of the family. For them prayer must be mostly accompanied by some self-inflicted sufferings. Sabhrai is just one such woman. A reader outside India will be astounded by her strength of will. And that is what Khushwant Singh is after- to make the readers exclaim: What a woman!

Just as Buta Singh is getting ready to leave for the office, there comes a deputation of Hindu merchants seeking his intervention in getting official permission for a Hindu procession they want to take. The magistrate reminds them that there is a prohibitory order against such processions. The merchants point out that the Sikhs and the Muslims have already taken out their processions and therefore the Hindus feel let down. When Buta Singh asks them to approach the Hindu magistrate Wazir Chand, they tell him they have already approached him and have got the reply that only Buta
Singh can get anything from Taylor, which pleases Buta Singh, who assures them to do his best.

It is to be noted that both the sides -- Buta Singh and the merchants -- are overacting in showing their humility both in action and in words. This is a feudal practice, which must have started even before the British rulers came to India. Feudal practices were fine-tuned in the British rule, when each one and each group was vying with one another in professing loyalty to the government. This is a typical scene where such sentiments and practices have been nicely brought out by the author. This scene is a mirror image of thousands of such meetings taking place all over the country. This is artistry combined with historicity, coupled with fictional strategy.

The scene then shifts to Taylor’s residence. Making use of the opportunity, Khushwant Singh offers insight into the psychology of British officers who existed in the years just before independence. Unlike his predecessors who came to India when colonialism was at its peak and who were overbearing in their demeanor, Taylor belonged to the generation of liberal minded officers who wanted to consider Indians as their equals. But the attempts made by Taylor and his equally simple and liberal minded wife, to make friends with Indians were not successful. Either they refused to be frank and outspoken or they tried to exploit their association. The Taylors felt uncomfortable in the company of fellow Englishmen whose snobbery was unbearable.

Khushwant Singh in his own way shows that there were two kinds of officers. Most of them belonged to the first kind who believed in white supremacy and therefore their own superiority and relished bossing over the natives. There were also people like Taylor who were understanding and helpful to the natives. Many such officers were found throughout India and Indians, even freedom fighters, have gratefully cherished their memory. Most of the Indians, however, have developed
feudal attitudes and cultivated the habit of sycophancy. They always considered Englishmen as masters from whom some favor or other could be extracted. They could never bring themselves to the level of behaving with Englishmen as their own equals. All these things have been tellingly brought out in the few lines written about the Taylors, while Buta Singh is waiting for an audience with the Deputy Commissioner.

Though the Deputy Commissioner entertains no visitors at home, Buta Singh feels that in his case an exception will be made. He is in for a disappointment. Taylor makes him wait, and when he comes out, his manner is brusque. Buta Singh uses all his ingenuity and even a bit of histrionics to persuade the Deputy Collector to issue a special dispensation, as he puts it, permitting the Hindu procession. At the end Buta Singh advises his superior that if he meets the Hindu delegation in person and conveys the order personally they would avoid any wrong interpretation. This episode, penned rather elaborately is an example of how the Indian officers got things out of the white superiors using all the weapons in their armor.

Sabhrai does not like Beena’s going to Wazir Chand’s house for combined study with Sita. Her instinct is right, since already Madan has started making passes her. In fact he drops Beena only because he got Champak, who is hotter than Beena. Beena is sullen at her mother’s reluctance. Finally, Sabhrai seems to relent but only if Champak accompanies her. Champak feigns reluctance at first and accepts later. She is curious to meet Madan who has become close to her husband.

Madan is in the verandah, and is at his loquacious best. Champak stays there with her knitting articles and Madan tries to get close to her. Even Champak seems to be anxious to start conversation with him. Madan praises Sher Singh’s qualities as a leader and an orator, while Champak reveals her admiration of Madan as a cricketer.
What is a cricketer, says Madan, when compared to Sher Singh who might be a Chief Minister some day. The conversation brings them closer and both of them are mildly flirtatious.

Sher Singh, who comes home late in the evening, imagines, as he always does that he is Hitler taking the salute from the army. Champak is waiting for him to get into bed. He wants to show off his knowledge of politics, but what he says is Latin to her. She changes the topic and tells him that she has met an admirer of his. When Sher Singh wants to know who it is, she purposely says, “Your dear sister’s friend, Madan”. She makes it a point to let her husband know that Beena has a crush on Madan. In fact it is she who has developed a liking for him. She continues that Madan was ogling at her. At the end of it all, as usual, she succeeds in having sex with Sher Singh. Through such small incidents, Khushwant Singh seems to psycho-analyze Champak. She has developed a liking for Madan and she is projecting it on Beena. Her blaming Madan is an indirect way of admiring him. She is also attempting to hoodwink Sher Singh.

The summer has started and everyone is eagerly awaiting the monsoon. Buta Singh quotes Taylor as having said that he has heard the monsoon bird calling, which means monsoon will soon be there. Taylor has said that the bird comes all the way from Africa with monsoon winds preceding the rains everywhere. Khushwant Singh is a keen observer of nature and he uses nature beautifully to describe the moods of the human beings. He puts words in the mouth of Taylor to describe the monsoon bird. He also anticipates some happy moments that are to follow.

The family of Buta Singh utters the prayers for the month. Everyone is complaining of the summer’s heat. Buta Singh suggests that Sher Singh can take his wife and sister to Simla. Sher Singh has got a lot of union work to attend to. He has
heard that Wazir Chand has rented a house in Simla. And only Madan and Sita are going to stay there. Perhaps they can share the house and Beena and Champak could stay with them. Buta Singh agrees with the idea. They can all share the house. He will stay in a hotel for the sake of his prestige. Buta Singh’s esteem has gone up in the view of his colleagues as well as the public. Hence his condescending attitude towards his fellow magistrate.

The shifting of the family to Simla is important because it is here that some family intrigues take place. There is a reference in the passage regarding Sabhrai’s not getting a chance to voice her opinion. Perhaps her intuition warns her of evil things destined to take place there.

Taylor has sent for Buta Singh and receives him in his residence. With khas fibre and iced beer, he has made the place as cool as he can make it. When Buta Singh comments on it, Taylor thinks of the other side.

Taylor felt slightly uneasy. He knew the conditions in which his Indian colleagues worked. Small cubicles packed with litigants and lawyers squabbling and shouting each other down; smell of sweat and stale clarified butter churned about vigorously by a ceiling fan. No curtains to keep out the glare; no khas to lessen the heat and bring in the aroma of the damp earth. Just bare white walls with the red betel spit splattered on the corners (98).

This is an excellent example how Khushwant Singh observes even seemingly obscure matters and recapitulates them. This passage describing the interiors of the court room not only brings out the scene, but even captures the atmosphere. One who reads can even feel the suffocation and the odor. This is an example of his narrative
skill. As part of history it reveals the atmosphere in which the natives worked while the English bosses lived in comfort.

Making use of an opportunity in the course of the conversation, Taylor introduces the topic of Sher Singh, as though casually, and congratulates him on the success of the election. Again, in a casual tone, he asks Buta Singh to send his son to meet him. When Buta Singh goes out, he realizes that Taylor has spoken of nothing other than his family. He starts wondering whether there was something about Sher Singh, known to the Deputy Collector but not to himself.

After the family goes out Champak enjoys her loneliness in the house. She gets into her kimono, stretches on her bed and starts listening to the radio. Sitting outside, Mundoo enjoys the music. When she reduces the volume just to tease him, he comes nearer. Champak takes her own time in the bathroom, keeping company with the radio music. She comes out of the bathroom without anything on, and catches Mundoo inside. She chides him, but orders him to get the towel for her. She sits infront of the three full length mirrors of the dressing table, puts her feet on the table, starts applying talcum powder to her body. Mundoo is lustfully watching her reflection.

Khushwant Singh may be describing the naked body of a woman and her movements. But he is not a pornographer. He practices reticence when it is called for. He has seldom described the sex act as western writers do. See how he records Mundoo’s reaction. “His little virginal mind was swamped with lustful longing. All he could do was to stare, squeeze his hands between his thighs and drool at the mouth. The torment ceased after a few minutes; he felt tired and ill” (102). This is all he writes to show that the boy masturbates. Champak will not leave him. She lies on her belly, bares herself upto her behind, and asks him to press her legs. She is aware of
the torment undergone by the teenager. It is her perverted way of deriving pleasure out of the boy’s discomfort. It is a kind of sadism.

When Sher Singh comes home, she makes the usual complaint about Mundoo. This habit too is a psychological aberration. You blame the other person for protecting yourself from your conscience. And it is her way of directing the talk towards sex by way of inducement. Sher Singh can always sense it. When he says he is tired, she says, “I’ll press your legs and you will sleep much better. Take off your clothes, it is so hot”. (104) Khushwant Singh is not interested in the sex act that follows since it is so obvious to the reader. He wants to point out that Champak is oversexed, and Sher Singh hardly ever comes up to her expectation.

Buta Singh is happy about the Deputy Commissioner’s inquiries about his family and he is proudly referring to it in his house. Sher Singh minimizes its importance and says it is just a trick learnt from Americans to create a good impression about themselves in others. Buta Singh does not like his son’s arguing with him. He insists that he must see Taylor as desired by the latter. As usual, Buta Singh feels grateful about the British superiors and Sher Singh shows the least respect for them. This generation gap is brought out in this piece of conversation. The elders were loyal to the British, whereas the youngsters had least respect for them. This was the case throughout India. This is recorded by Khushwant Singh through the fictional characters.

Sher Singh gets his appointment with the Deputy Collector on the visitors’ day. He is made to wait with sundry visitors, all of whom compliment him on what they think is a change of mind. According to them it is a wise decision. All this only irks the young man. This shows how the people in the higher rungs of society like the merchants felt about the British Raj. They felt it was all powerful and only the
foolhardy people would oppose it. Their loyalty to the government is opportunistic and is chiefly bread and butter issue.

Fortunately, Sher Singh is the first to be called in. Taylor, as usual, takes his own time in recognizing him. When he does speak, he is quite forthcoming. With all his professed nationalism, Sher Singh is rattled in the officer’s presence and stammers while talking to him. He is totally won over when Taylor compliments him in a friendly tone. But this is just an act put on by Taylor as indicated by what follows.

As always, Khushwant Singh describes it to the minutest detail with the thoroughness of a movie script writer. Talking about the ongoing World War, “Things are not going too well for us, are they?” queried Taylor. He picked up a shiny metal tube from his table and tossed it in the air several times. Sher Singh was not sure what it was, but he was fascinated by the object. Taylor went on: ‘It could put ideas in the minds of people who do not like us. Of course, we can rely on our friends. The Sikhs have a long tradition of loyalty to the British …… And you know your father is my closest colleague. He is a very good man…….’ “Taylor smiled looking straight at Sher Singh. He put one of the tubes to his lower lip, blew into it and made it whistle. It was an empty cartridge. Sher Singh went pale (110)

This is one of the most telling passages written by Khushwant Singh, by any author for that matter. If ever one is looking for tact at its best, it is here, displayed by Taylor, noted for his balance of mind, even temper and cool behavior. His purpose is to rattle Sher Singh. He does it without raising his voice, without lifting an accusing finger and without losing his cool. His smile never leaves his face. He goes on complimenting the young man, his father and his entire race. And, he does this out of regard for the old man whose loyalty is beyond question.
The lambardar whom Sher Singh and his young companions run into after the shooting episode, has dutifully informed the officials of the matter. He has also collected the empty cartridges with the thoroughness of a police informer. After all it is his duty for which he is paid by the government. It was foolish on the part of Sher Singh to have believed that things would not go this far. And he has been misled by the ever carefree Madan.

No doubt that Taylor has come to know of the entire episode. Certainly having known of the young man’s nationalistic sentiments he would even have guessed his intentions to lead a terrorist gang. Also, he knows the stuff Sher Singh is made of. Hence, he has come to the conclusion that a mild warning will be enough. And in fact that has been enough to scare the terrorist-to-be, out of his wits. Continuing in the same friendly manner, Taylor says ‘Sat Sri Akal’ and reminds the young man that it meant ‘God is truth’. Perhaps he is advising him to be truthful in all actions and keep clear of troubles.

Taylor amply succeeds in his endeavor. Sher Singh walks out of the bungalow vacantly.

He walked aimlessly down the road till he found a quiet spot. He sat down on the grassy curb with his head between his knees. He was angry, humiliated and frightened. He wanted to cry but no tears would come into his eyes. He sat like that for a long time till the anger and humiliation receded to the background and only fear remained. Fear of what Taylor might do to him, fear of what the whole family would say for the way he has disgraced his father. (111)
Sher Singh is loyal to his father and also proud of him. Even while contradicting him, he shows caution. He knows where to stop. He also knows his father’s reputation in the society. Sher Singh is certainly not the kind of man who would throw all this to the winds and fight for his country. He is not ready to make a martyr of himself. Only he is driven by the popular sentiment and what he reads in the newspapers. Things would have rested there but for the greed of the lambardar. This Taylor – Sher Singh episode shows the writer as a master craftsman. Every movement and every stroke counts in the scene. The way in which the British officer lets the young student leader know that he is in possession of the tell-tale cartridges is masterly.

This scene also can be taken as a slice of history depicted with fictional characters. Students of history know that there were so many varieties of British officers- brutes, foolhardy idiots, clever men, tactful people as well as tactless people. Taylor is a friendly and tactful officer, but with utmost loyalty to his government. And there were many young men who would have fitted into Sher Singh’s shoes.

In Simla, Madan, Sita, Beena and Champak plan to go on a picnic to Mashobra. Since all rickshaws have already been reserved, they have to hire bicycles. Only three are available which they take anyway. Khushwant Singh says that in Simla most people carry raincoats as a matter of style. Thus at every opportunity he records something, trivial or important, to add realism to his narration. Besides they serve as a pointer to the social habits and customs of the day and become part of the historicity of the novel.

Sita and Beena have a bicycle each and Madan and Champak have to share the third one. And it does not have a carrier. They walk the distance, wheeling their
bicycles. Madan makes funny remarks about the people who pass by; he wants to impress the girls. They take their lunch in an isolated place and have a siesta.

Khushwant Singh adds a native touch to the narrative by introducing a native woman who is tending sheep. She sings in a plaintive tone which attracts Beena. At Beena’s request she sings a full song which she finds pleasing. Beena presents her golden bangle to the woman. When Madan meets Beena alone, he makes passes at her and asks her to come to his room after everyone is asleep.

Before they have their tea in the hotel, clouds start gathering. Madan asks Beena and Sita to go early since he will have to be slow, taking Champak along with him. Madan takes his own time settling the bill. After taking the bicycle he puts his folded raincoat on the bar and helps Champak to get on the bicycle liberally touching her at the wrong places, which is to her liking. On the way, it starts raining and they take shelter in the entrance of a house. There, Madan sheds all inhibitions and kisses her profusely to which she responds with equal alacrity. Even without Madan’s asking, she promises to go to his room at night.

Sabhrai has got the habit of opening the Holy Book at random and read the passage which she takes to be the Guru’s message for the month. That month’s message disturbs her.

“O Black Buck, why loveth thou

The pasture of fenced-in fields?

Forbidden fruit is sweet but for a few days

It entices and ensnares

Then leaves one sorrowing”. (129)
She is disturbed by it, since she has already got her suspicions. However, she dutifully copies it and sends it to Simla. Beena reads it. It does not prevent her from going to Madan’s room as promised. She has her own misgivings and is agonized by the thoughts of possible reaction in the family. Yet, lust gets better of her and she tries to enter Madan’s room only to find that Champak has beaten her to it.

Khushwant Singh probably conveys that in the families which are extremely religious and where even normal pleasures are forbidden, youngsters start going wayward, finding pastures for pent-up passion. It is difficult to fathom the purpose of showing Beena as one who welcomes Madan’s flirtations. However, she does not get an opportunity to be alone with Madan despite her willingness. Madan drops her because he gets a more vivacious and forthcoming partner in Champak.

Sher Singh is unable to get over the scene created by his meeting with Taylor. He cannot muster courage to frankly tell Taylor what his views are. His father’s position and honor are to be considered. None of his friends is helpful in the time of need. They do not come forward to keep the arms with them. This exposes the hollowness of the terrorist aspirants of the days. They can only talk, but can hardly act. There must have been millions of young men in India in those days who were attracted by the talk of freedom but who did not have the guts to act. Yet they never stopped talking of kicking the British out. The lambardar, a shy and slimy customer, calls on Sher Singh, shows three empty cartridges, extracts fifty rupees after a long talk, professing false loyalty. The headman sees the opulence Sher Singh lives in and he does not mind extracting some money out of him. Many officials in the British period, high and low, had their own ways of extracting money from people, either through bribery or blackmail. The lambardar is a type and most of these behaved just
like this one did. They were part of the history of the days. They were most unscrupulous.

Shunno is in the habit of attending all shrines — Hindu, Sikh and Muslim. She has a lot of faith in Peer Sahib, below thirty, the custodian of a Darga. He was a celibate, and spent his time in the study of the scriptures. Shunno waits till all the visitors have left and tells him about her ailment. With great hesitation she bares herself so that Peer Sahib can examine her. He finds no diseases in her.

His scrutiny was no longer confined to clinical ends. With the vows of celibacy to which he was committed, sex got little chance of natural expression. He had had to be satisfied with his own devices or occasionally take liberties with little boys sent by their mothers to learn the Scripture. These were not the normally accepted expressions of sex and therefore did not violate the rules of celibacy as he interpreted them. Neither did an intercourse with an infidel woman who might in this way be brought on the right path. (158)

This is an excellent example of Khushwant Singh’s humour. In fact he cannot write a few pages without humour, unless it is filled with pathos. Though celibacy is glorified in all religions it is impossible to practice. Such was the pressure of libido – or sex instinct. So, the clerics indulge in some sort of self deception as the Peer Sahib. This view is endorsed by Khushwant Singh. He believes there is a lot of hypocrisy in Indian way of treating sex, with prudery. The character of Peer Sahib is his own way of expressing this hypocrisy. What about Shunno? “Her instincts had been buried under a thick pack of conventional morality, prescribed for a Hindu widow – religion, charity, gossip about sex, but no sex”. (159) But it is not enough to quell her instincts,
which are too strong to be destroyed. They defy all such attempts. When she gets this opportunity, she succumbs to it, though with a bit of initial reluctance.

Shunno repeats this visit. As a result, her temper improves. She stops ill-treating Mundoo. She regains her mental balance. Mundoo on his part stops his mischievous habit of mixing red paste with her water. What she lacked was sexual intercourse, which she was deprived of by the unnatural culture and traditions of India. The implication of the author is such transgressions are inevitable and are going on everywhere.

In Simla, things are moving peacefully and Sabhrai is happy with what she finds there. All of a sudden there is political turmoil. The police have started arresting the demonstrators everywhere and riots have erupted all around. Sita gives an example of police violence when she describes what happened in front of her just the previous day. A boy of fifteen or less who came to picket an English store was hit full in the face by a European sergeant and started rolling down at least a dozen steps, until someone helped him. The sergeant arrested the boy and the helper. Such was the police brutality. Even Indian policemen could be equally brutal or even more brutal. This was witnessed all over India during the freedom struggle. This piece of history is recorded by the author through this fictitious incident, which is but a representation of millions of such incidents that were going on all over India at that time.

Champak wants to go back to her husband, since he is likely to join these pickets. After some discussion it is decided that Madan should take her since he professes to be equally concerned about his brother Sher Singh. When they reach the railway station, they find all upper class berths reserved for the soldiers who were being sent to various cities. Madan takes a chance and buys two second class tickets. He slips a ten rupee note in a young ticket collector’s hand and urges him to find a
second class coupe for him. Ten rupees is too high a sum to be returned. Then the young man recognizes Madan as the famous cricketer and is willing to help him without any remuneration. This shows how famous cricketers were even in those days. A ticket collector is willing to take a heavy risk and help him against the rules. 

“Mr. Madan, if you can hit them for sixers, I can write them down on my penis”. (165)

This is characteristic of Khushwantian humour, who never hesitates to use dirty words. This must be a verbal translation of some Punjabi expletive.

The ticket collector tears up an already made reservation slip and puts the name of Mr. and Mrs. Madan in its place. Before the midnight train starts, most of the passengers have retired to bed. Two soldiers cannot locate their coupe. They ask the ticket collector what happened. The conversation, in which the British soldiers use a lot of mime to explain their words is quite comical. When he says there is no reservation and they can go by the morning train, they reply: ‘Mawhnin? Wot you talking Babu? Court martial if we don’t get there tomorrow. Court martial you know?’ The soldier unslung his sten gun, stuck the nozzle in Mussadi Lal’s belly and explained ‘Tatataatatatatatat – bang’. He fell back a step to indicate the effect of the firing. Unnerstan? Give us them berths or we will stick the gun up your tail. . . Hurry – juldi.’ (167) The ticket collector manages to put them in the guard’s compartment, saying in Hindustani. “Let these whites who sleep with their sisters get in till they can find a place” (168)

There is a lot of Khushwantian humour in this episode, with profanities used in dozens. The ticket collector enjoys the entire episode. Those were the days when youngsters hated the British. Being a ticket collector, there was not much he could do against them. Now an opportunity has presented itself and he has put it to the best use. And he has shown a lot of courage. He has torn the already made reservation and put
two newcomers in the place. Quite an audacious act! He enjoys the entire episode. Khushwant Singh has always been on the side of freedom lovers. He does not spare those who side English, particularly youngsters. He must have enjoyed creating the character, who, in spite of his brief appearance, has served a purpose. There were a lot of youngsters like him in those days, waiting for an opportunity to snub the British.

None of these happenings disturbed the occupants of the coupe. Champak was concerned about Sher Singh before reaching the station. Now she is oblivious to everything outside the coupe. Her entire being is occupied only with Madan. The exhibitionist that she is, she will not allow Madan to switch off the light. She removes all her clothes and gives herself to her lover with abandon, and he takes advantage of the situation.

Now Madan is a womanizer, but Champak certainly is not a wayward woman. She is sex starved. She has been brought up in a tradition which has taught her sex is sinful and is indulged in only to please one’s man. Now, her man is not interested in sex, there being other things to occupy him. It is always she who takes the initiative, even then her husband is not prepared to receive what she is about to give. Naturally she feels neglected and forlorn. When she meets somebody who enjoys her nakedness, her conversation, her gestures and her lust— is there any wonder that she succumbs to him? The character of Champak has been created by Khushwant Singh to tell the Indian moralists what a woman is, what she is made of, what she needs and how she must be treated.

A cyclostyled circular in English, “Manifesto of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army,” secretly circulated makes a call to the Indian youth to rise against the foreign rulers through terrorist activities. While receiving the news of agitations and arrests everywhere, Sher Singh feels guilty of sitting in the comfort of his home.
His companions too want to do something, provided he comes forward to lead them. They take the oath of secrecy in the name of Bhagat Singh and decide to blow up a bridge. As they have had no experience, they want to blow up the canal bridge by way of learning. They camouflage themselves as much as they can, meet near the bridge and blow up a small part of the bridge with bombs. The choice of the location is wrong since they have already been caught by the village headman during their shooting practice and the headman has not been ready to buy their hunting story.

At home, he is surprised to find Champak, who chides him for not being at home, and even hints at his being unfaithful to her, which merely amuses Sher Singh. He knows she is only kidding and decides to pay in her own coin: ‘I am not like your Madan’, he retorts. This piece of dialogue is an excellent example of dramatic irony. Sher Singh so easily refers to Madan because he believes that his wife will never be unfaithful to him. Champak makes a mental comparison of the two men and cannot help feeling disappointed with her own husband.

Taylor calls all the magistrates to ask them to be vigilant. At the end he asks Buta Singh to stay back. He shows the magistrate a copy of the ‘Manifesto’, and suggests that Buta Singh might track the ‘young hot heads’ through his own son so that they may be saved from going to ruin. His tone is patronizing and it is possible he means what he says. At the end, he hands over a rifle license to Buta Singh asked for by Sher Singh. We can guess from the episode that Taylor has kept track of Sher Singh’s movement. Yet out of consideration for Buta Singh’s loyalty and good nature, he does not want to do anything precipitous. He must also be knowing Sher Singh’s regard for his father.

The wily lambardar visits Sher Singh, and lets him know that he knows a lot about him. He has seen holes in the canal which broke the leg of his bullock, which
cost him Rs. 300. He insists on knowing the names of his companions. Sher Singh promises to meet him at seven o’clock in the evening at the bridge. When the meeting takes place the young men fire shots into the headman’s body, dump it into a ditch and cover it carefully. The relatives of the lambardar report his absence only after a couple of weeks. Neither the victim nor the murderer can be traced and the Police Commissioner wants to close the file ‘as untraced’.

Again Sher Singh has shown that he is too tactless to become a terrorist. Usually a lot of planning is gone into before an act of terrorism. All sorts of possibilities are thoroughly analyzed and every possible loophole is anticipated and plugged. But Sher Singh chooses a spot that is too obvious and has already been noticed. He should also have suspected that with his credentials and that of his father, his movements would be watched by the Deputy Commissioner.

The Deputy Commissioner hands over to the Police Commissioner a warrant to search Buta Singh’s house and another one to arrest his son. While he wants the police to be gentle to the father, he wants the tough Anglo Indian sergeants ‘to give the works’ to Sher Singh. The search is made after Buta Singh is sneaked away to Taylor’s office. They could find nothing incriminating after what they thought was a thorough search. The pit in the garage where the firearms are hidden is not searched.

Sher Singh gets beaten by the Anglo Indian sergeants who seem to relish the job. Unable to stand the beating the young man starts crying. A head constable helps him stand up and whispers: ‘Be a man. Don’t degrade yourself before these white bastards’. (199) This little piece of dialogue is an example of everybody in India having started hating the British. Even policemen who carry out their orders are no exception.
Taylor treats Buta Singh with utmost kindness and understanding. He tells him all he knows - and Buta Singh does not about his son and promises that Sher Singh he would be made a crown witness if he discloses the names of his associates. Otherwise, he must face the consequences of his act.

Sabhrai is sent for and when she returns from Simla, Mrs. Taylor goes in person to the railway station to receive her. This is to show how much the Taylors appreciate the loyalty of Buta Singh. Once at home Sabhrai comes to know what has happened. Her husband is angry and worried, since his dreams have been shattered. Sabhrai, as can be anticipated, decides to do non-stop reading of the Granth to receive the Guru’s guidance.

Sher Singh is a pampered youth, not a strong man. Yet he holds out as much as he can. The Anglo Indian sergeants treat him in the most indecent manner possible. He is anxious to find out how much the police know. If they have found out who the others were, they would have arrested them by this time.

The policemen tell him they already know all the names and all that has happened. The others have revealed everything. They interrogate Sher Singh only because the Deputy Commissioner wants to give him a chance to escape. This is a lie and such tactics are always used by the police.

Speaking of the Anglo Indian community, Justice A.S.P.Ayyar is reported to have referred to them as ‘the standing monuments of European morality and Indian poverty. Owing to their fair complexion and their religion being Christianity, they were able to get posted in many government establishments. They were found in good numbers in the police force. Forgetting their dubious origin, they tried to identify themselves with the British and considered England as their motherland. Bereft of any
culture, they behaved in a boorish manner, often using slangs and profanities. It is to them Taylor gives the responsibility of extracting the truth out of Sher Singh. They do their job well, beating, threatening and abusing him. They used the word ‘nigger’ profusely to denote the natives, a word Taylor never used in his conversation. “Take this bloody patriot to the station and put some red hot chillies up his arse” (198) “Could I consult a lawyer?” “Rape your sister! exploded one of the sergeants. We want to give you a chance to save your neck and you want to bring in lawyers here. Give him the rod properly greased”. (220-221) “Ok, you see your bloody Bap. We’ll talk to you later”. “And if you want our advice on how to kick the British out of India, don’t hesitate to ask’. They roared with laughter and left” (222). With these strokes Khushwant Singh gives the readers a glimpse into the behavior and manners of Anglo Indians, particularly those in the police force.

Buta Singh was so ashamed of his son and so angry with him, who with his thoughtless behavior has cost him his job, reputation, future, in fact everything that gave him respectability. If Sher Singh refuses to part with information regarding his companions he was sure to be hanged. Naturally, everyone in the family wants him back, no matter what. When the sub inspector comes there to take Buta Singh to see his son as desired by him, Sabhrai undertakes to go to the police station in four days. And she hands over a small prayer book to be given to him with the message that he must tell the prayers regularly. Though a Muslim, the sub-inspector receives it reverently, kisses it and assures her that Allah will protect her son. He addresses her ‘Mataji’. In the entire novel, we find Muslims being viewed with suspicion by the other communities as the demand for partition had been gaining ground. But this and a few other incidents show that they shared with the other communities, contempt for the British yoke.
Sabhrai spends the whole night in the gurudwara as sorrow stricken people do. She knows that Sher Singh’s life hangs on her advice. The author has given a minute by minute account of her agony. Everybody, her husband, daughter and daughter-in-law want him to confess and save himself. Sabhrai does not feel that way. She wants to know what her son himself wants to do! She is not sure whether the police have the information they claim to have. Again, there cannot be any doubt that she wants her beloved son back. She thinks of those occasions when the Guru protected the believers. “She was a Sikh; so was her son. Why did she ever have any doubts?” By the time the prayer ended, the grey light of dawn had dimmed the lesser stars … only the morning star shone a pure, silvery white. At last, there was peace in her soul”. (229) She has come to the decision, guided by the Guru that her son must behave like a Sikh and not in a cowardly manner.

The Deputy Commissioner sends his car to take Sabhra to the police station, an act of kindness that moves them. At the end of a heart rending meeting at the police station, Sabhra tells her son that it is Guru’s words that count, not what everyone feels. She says: “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”. (234)

The woman’s courage and fortitude are matchless. What amount of courage will be needed to give this advice to her son who is almost facing the gallows! That is the stuff Sabhra is made of. And India can boast of many such men and women who have displayed enormous courage and stood by their principles rather than seeking a dishonorable escape. To that extent Sabhra’s character may be said to represent historicity through a fictional character. Sabhra gets a chill after returning from the prison, but no one knows at that time that it is fatal. Her temperature rises to 104°F
and she is in a delirium. The doctor assures them that there is no need to be scared, though.

Buta Singh feels indebted to the Taylors who have stood by him and his family in the hour of distress. He sends Mrs. Taylor a Christmas gift of oranges. Mrs. Taylor visits the ailing Sabhrai, and reassures them and leaves for home. At home Mrs. Taylor seems to be ill at ease, and Taylor wants to know what it is. After Taylor tells her that there is no case against Sher Singh, she suggests that they can release him as a sort of Christmas present to Buta Singh and his wife.

It is the Muslim sub inspector who carries the news to Sher Singh, who sends a message to Madan. Madan collects all student nationalists and they arrange a procession to take their leader from jail to his residence. It is a surprise to the family. Sabhrai is too ill to grasp the news immediately but when she feels her son’s person, she is convinced. She more or less put him on the way to death. She wonders what made him free. After a week, there was rejoicing once more as Buta Singh’s name is included in the New Year Honors list. At last, Sabhrai breathes her last in the most peaceful manner possible.

The title is symbolic. Nightingale, or bulbul, stands for spring, the happiest time on earth. When Sabhrai asks his son what independence means, he says nightingales will sing. When she is nearing her death, Sabhrai says “I shall not hear the nightingale”, yet, she is sure that nightingales will visit the place and sing. She is sure that there are happier times awaiting the family; only she will not be amidst them.

Taylor says “In a way you have the history of Indo-British relationships represented by Buta Singh’s family tree. His grandfather fought against us in 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 to be so muddled in the present” (243) Buta Singh is the typical father figure, presides over the family, and decides what each one must do and does not brook dissent. In every matter, his word is final.

As a magistrate, his loyalty to the government is beyond question. He is popular with the Taylors owing to his sincerity, hard work and reliability. He deserves the honor he is decorated with. All the same, he knows in his heart of hearts, that people are losing respect for the English masters. As a result he is often accused of being double faced. He has a high sense of gratitude which is revealed in the way he chokes with gratitude at the way in which Mrs. Taylor helped them in the last days of Sabhrai.

Sher Singh, has to disagree with his father in a lot of matters, not only owing to the generation gap, but mainly owing to the transition taking place in India. While Buta Singh stands for loyalty to the British raj, the young man is working for its end. Yet, his reverence for his father never diminishes.

All the same, he is more hankering after fame and less prepared for sacrifices. His attempts at terrorism end up in fiasco. The first time he was caught in the act and it went to the attention of the Deputy Commissioner. On the second occasion, he was saved by sheer luck, since the lambardar’s body was not found. It is surprising that he never suspects his infidel wife. It is probably because he is interested in his own affairs and has little time for her.

Khushwant Singh has created two interesting characters in the Taylors. Both are liberal minded and have no sympathy for the domineering fellow officers. Added
to that is the global trend which is moving towards equality. Taylor is a sympathizer of the Liberal Party and realizes that Indian independence is but a question of time. Though his attempts at befriending Indians are a failure, he treats them with sympathy and understanding. It is out of his goodwill for Buta Singh, that he gives a long rope to his son and treats him with utmost decency, despite his known contempt for the British government and his overt acts which amounted to treason in those days.

Mrs. Joyce Taylor is by very nature compassionate and is understanding towards Buta Singh. If she occasionally calls him ‘walrus’ it is more out of a liking for the man than otherwise. Her regard for the man remains unaffected though she is unable to fully comprehend him. On the other hand, her respect for Sabhrai increases every day. It is superb that this lady thinks of making a Christmas present to the family by releasing Sher Singh. It is in keeping with her character. Her sympathetic listening to Buta Singh when she visits him after his wife’s death, and her words of understanding, offer him the necessary willpower to withstand the ordeal. No one else, not even his fellow officers, could have given this to him. Mrs. Taylor stands for real friendship which expects nothing in return. When Buta Singh thinks of a suitable memorial for his wife, it is she who thinks in the right lines and promises to think of a befitting charity. This scene is one of the masterly creations of Khushwant Singh. A lesser writer would not have thought in these lines.

One character who stands out like the Rock of Gibraltar is Sabhari who is certainly above average, a person endowed with intuition, owing to her piety which enables her to delve deep into the Guru’s words. Yet, she is quite an understanding creature, often unobtrusive. She wants Champak to take care of her husband, but seldom tells her what to do. She is loving and obedient to her husband as a typical housewife. She is concerned about Beena who is in an impressionable age. Towards
the end of her life she thinks of marrying her off. Her fears regarding Madan are well
founded, but, happily, she does not know his true colors. She is doting towards her
‘Ruby’, her ‘Moon’, Sher Singh, whom she treats like a child. She is willing to
undergo any ordeal to get him out of his unfortunate predicament. She is willing to
make any sacrifice for the happiness of the family.

Without coming to any hasty conclusion like others as to what should be done,
she spends a night in the Gurudwara, braving the chill weather, waiting for the Guru’s
guidance. And the guidance does come and when it does, she complies with it into
without the slightest doubt or hesitation, though it runs contrary to the thinking of her
own husband and daughter.

And she does not press it on her son. She says that it was the advice given to
her by the guru, not to him, thereby implying that he has the freedom to take it or
leave it. At last, her son follows it and comes out of prison with a clear conscience,
acquitted as innocent. He does not have to be mean himself and his family by
becoming a crown witness. When Sabhrai meets with her death she does it with total
contentment as if she is going to her Guru’s mansion as an invited guest.

How does one reconcile the denouement of the novel, though grand and
appropriate, with Khushwant Singh’s agnosticism? Now, Sabhrai is a symbol of piety,
who believes that not a leaf will stir without God’s will. Such faith is ingrained in the
Indian ethos and reinforced from time to time by prophets of all religions. Sabhrai
believes in the religions implicitly. Her faith is profound, not superficial. Often, she
opens the Granth at random and considers the passage as the guidance for the month
for every member of the family.
While sitting in the Gurudwara and waiting for Guru’s guidance regarding her son, she thinks of the Guru who was a model warrior, with unflinching courage. He was formidable looking, with his falcon. His command to all the Sikhs was to face the enemy with courage. He sacrificed all his four sons for the cause.

While Sabhrai was meditating, with her inner being filled to the brim with the thoughts of the Guru, it can be interpreted by an agnostic that her own thoughts and feelings stored in her heart of hearts crystallized into the guidance, which she accepts as the words of the Guru. To that extent, Khushwant Singh’s agnosticism and Sabhrai’s faith can be reconciled to each other.

And the guidance seems to benefit as Sher Singh comes out with flying colors, literally too, owing to Madan, and flies into his mother’s arms.

“The Lord hath entered my being. I make my pilgrimage.

Within myself and am purified.

I met Him

He found me good.

And let me lose myself in Him”.(259)

This passage from the scripture, read after Sabhrai’s death, eminently sums up her life.

Khushwant Singh again reveals himself as a skillful craftsman in the second Novel I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale. Like the earlier novel, this novel too is noted for its symbolic significance. In this novel the “nightingale” is a symbol of spring -- peace, prosperity and happiness. Every action in the story is a pointer to the welcome spring of independence. Not only Sher Singh, the nationalist, even Taylor is aware of
it. To Sabhrai, nightingale, that is spring, is a multi-dimensional symbol. It means to her much more than political independence; it stands for righteousness, truth, humanism and understanding. Symbolism is in evidence even in the death of Saurus Crane, which stands for mindless destruction and avoidable tragedy. “Sabhrai symbolizes instinctive wisdom and the essential India.” (R.S. Singh 20)

Simplicity of language, lucidity of style, clarity of expression, use of words and phrases found in common parlance and construction of short sentences with no obscurity or ambiguity mark the style of Khushwant Singh in *I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale*. His style is adorned with a large number of figures of speech. But at the same time Khushwant Singh is notoriously famous for “double talk” which is becoming common in use in recent literature, especially in sizzling fiction. Because of the impact of fiction and film, words and phrases hitherto considered unacceptable and unprintable have won an immediate audience.

Khushwant Singh has used typical Indian bawdy expressions, perhaps, to create titillating effect and also to add to the realistic portrayal. Plentiful employment of words and epithets of abuse, filthy language and unseemly expressions mar his otherwise elegant style. Khushwant Singh’s use of phrases, proverbs and sayings in Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu rendered into English lends Indianness to his English. In his novels, he has also quoted from Urdu poetry, noted for its sensuousness and sensuality.

Khushwant Singh keeps his hand attentively always on the pulse of the reading public. What they demanded, he supplied. He catered to the popular taste of the audience most of whom delighted in words and phrases of abuse. By way of illustration examples may be culled from the novel under reference: “I cannot write
on my penis”, “Let these Whites who sleep with their sisters”. Such expressions have been used to draw the attention of the readers. Brutally frank presentation of marital and extra-marital sexual lure, display of exhibitionism and portrayal of nudity earned him the title “the dirty old man” (Lalit Kumar 41).

Khushwant Singh considers summer as the Indian “source of life”. To the Europeans, there are four seasons in a year, but to the Indians, it means only one season. That season is preceded by the desolation of winter, the hope of spring, the fullness of summer and the fulfilment of autumn all in one. Khushwant Singh seems to have observed Nature not through the spectacles of books but by his intimate familiarity with the music and melody of several birds, the pleasant fragrance of flowers and the dazzling beauty of the mountains and meadows. Indeed, his love for Nature transports the readers from the world of sensuality to the world of sensuous beauty.

Khushwant Singh thinks like a painter and writes like a poet. Though it is a novel, passages of poetic beauty have blossomed from the writer. The following passage from the text though in prose is an apology for the poetry in it. For sheer enjoyment, the text in full is quoted below:

Dense masses of dark clouds sweep across the heavens like a celestial army with black banners. The deep role of thunder sounds like the beating of a billion drums. Crooked shafts of sliver zigzag in lightning flashes against the black sky. Then comes the rain itself. First it falls in fat drops; the earth rises to meet them. She laps them up thirstily and is filled with fragrance. Then it comes in torrents which she receives with the supine gratitude of a woman being ravished by her lover. It
impregnates her with life which bursts forth in abundance within a few hours. Where there was nothing, there is everything: green grass, snakes, centipedes, worms, and millions of insects. (206)

Khushwant Singh’s narrative art is also made up of his exposing hypocrisy, which is another method of employing irony. He exposes hypocrisy from everyday life of the Indians. In the episodes involving Champak and the teenager Munda, there is discernible hypocrisy, a characteristic feature of the Indians. The conversation that ensues between Champak and Sher Singh is couched in irony. There is irony in the death bed scene of Sabhrai. There are many illustrations of irony in the exchange of talk between Sher Singh and Buta Singh.

After indulging in adultery with Madan, Champak returns home; and in a playful way she accuses her innocent husband of committing infidelity which he had not committed. Champak also knows what she says is only a playful lie. But the real culprit is Champak which Sher Singh is not aware of. Without suspecting Champak Sher Singh humourously says “I am not like one of those chaps…..like your Madan. That types go about sleeping with anyone they can. For me, it is only you” (211). Unknowing about the affair between Madan and Champak, Sher Singh utters the word “your Madan”. There is real irony in this statement which provokes laughter.

The novel I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale is marked by foolery and buffoonery. The word “nightingale” becomes a source of humour in the novel. There is plenty of humour in the family gatherings in I Shall not Hear the Nightingale: The scene where Sabhrai has her laugh at the expense of Buta Singh when he unsuccessfully tries to remove a bit of curry stuck to his moustache. Khushwant Singh’s narrative gains strength in his marvellous artistry when he makes use of gestures and bodily movements to capture the attention of the readers. The presentation of Shunno and
Munda conducting themselves does not fail to make the readers having a side-splitting laughter. The meetings between Shunno and the Muslim cleric do not fail to provoke anyone to laugh. The episode in which the ticket collector outwits the English officer by allotting the coupe to Madan and Champak makes the readers burst into peals of laughter.

Love of Nature pervades the narrative art of Khushwant Singh. Firstly, his love of Nature is revealed in his tilting the novel after a bird from the world of fauna. Elsewhere in the novel, he states that Nature as symbolised by the dog is helpful to man, whereas man is usually cruel. For instance, the dog tries to save its master from being beaten by the policeman but the dog gets beaten up and is rendered lame by the callous policeman. The author brings out the unselfish behaviour of the dog recollected by Sher Singh in his jail-cell when he says how the dog leapt at the sergeant who had beaten him.

Khushwant Singh enjoys sights and sounds of Nature: In his description of and delight in Nature he strikes a parallel to Ruskin Bond. He has ears for the sounds of Nature -- the calling of a drongo bird, the cawing of crows, the chirping of sparrows and the piercing cry of a kite. He has also eyes for the sights of Nature. The description of summer is an example of his keen power of observation and his realistic portrayal. Beautiful vignettes emerge from Khushwant Singh -- the devils spiralling their way across the parched land and the flowing of the storm with blind fury.