

A Psychedelic Sagaciousness into Victor's Life: Khushwant Singh's Burial at Sea

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Abstract

Khushwant Singh, one of India's most read and well-known writer in Contemporary Indian Literature, has written about the societal, political and individual's faults and lacunae, which create interest into significant appraisal of his novel *Burial at Sea* with the intention of ascertaining individual's survival as well as the struggle for independence and the after effects of India's independence. In this paper we turn towards the Indian history where Victor Jai Bhagwan is depicted as a different kind of freedom fighter who did not fight physically but economically. This paper analyzes his life course from his birth in slave India, education in England, disagreement with Gandhiji's vision for the future India but respect for him, establishment of the mills to bring the benefits of modern industry, recognition as famous business tycoon of India, revitalization of his sexual instinct and love for a tantric woman, and finally murder by some people which is adroitly portrayed by Khushwant Singh. In this paper an attempt has been made for a psychedelic insight into the life of a striving figure and a brilliant young man who was fiercely committed to his country.

Keywords: Psychedelic; independence; sagaciousness; struggle; revitalization.

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Introduction

Burial at sea, the fifth novel of Khushwant Singh, takes the psychedelic insight into an individual's life and the freedom struggle of India. It is a novel of 14 chapters with craftily chiseled plots fitting into a well contoured structure. The title sounds little spiritual but mundane affairs like societal, political and individual's struggle are at prior. It's a saga of an individual named Victor Jai Bhagwan who is made legendary in the novel because of his actions and economical support he provided to the country by industrialization while struggling for freedom.

He took his first breath in slave India but he was determined to make India economically stronger and independent. 'Modernize or perish' was the slogan he gave to Indian industrialists to be a free and developed country. On the other hand, Gandhi and his followers were working to throw the British out of the country. Khushwant Singh has basically portrayed the two different kinds of strata of freedom fighters in the novel.

The novel begins with some gloomy lines of the description of the place where the main protagonist Jai Bhagwan's last journey starts, after his demise –

"For two days and nights his embalmed body lay in the Darbar Hall of the Governor's palatial residence overlooking the Arabian Sea. Raj Bhavan had been thrown open to the citizens so they could pay homage to the man who perhaps had done more for their country than anyone else in living memory. Though few people knew him personally, he had become a legend; the line of homage-payers bearing wreaths and flowers stretched over a mile beyond the entrance gate." (Singh, 1)

This gloomy beginning reminds the readers the tragic heroes of Shakespeare's plays where the main protagonist dies at end of the story. The very first chapter intelligently engrosses the readers into the narrative with its main character's dismal death and unusual burial at Arabian Sea. One after another the sequence of events have so deftly been set up further by the author in the novel that each plot runs towards its destiny parallel to the main plot of Jai Bhagwan's life struggle.

Reflection of Jawahar Lal Nehru and Indira Gandhi's Lives

Burial at Sea is based on the lives of Jawahar Lal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi which somewhat discloses the veiled tales of these worshipped people by generations after generations in India

Jawahar Lal Nehru's father Moti Lal Nehru is depicted as a renowned anglicized barrister Kishan Lal Mattoo who wants to bring up his only son as an English aristocrat.

Jawahar Lal Nehru is presented as Jai (Victor) Bhagwan who becomes an English well-bred rich industrialist, whereas Indira Gandhi, his daughter as headstrong, self willed and sharp tongued Bharati, daughter of Jai Bhagwan who inherits his wealth and empire after his death.

Nehru's relationship with Shraddha Mata, an Indian Sanyasin who was a strong follower of Hinduism with ample influence was supposedly conspired by Hindu Maha Sabha to sidetrack Nehru from his dream of secular India. However Nehru himself wrote about his relationship with Shraddha Mata in these words,

"it is true that the lady in question met me several times...we discussed the Hindu Code Bill and the question of language. She tried to influence me and I tried to influence her the other way. I don't know what success I had but she had none."

Similarly Khushwant Singh has highlighted Indira Gandhi's connection with Dhirendra Swami, the God man who exerted considerable clout during the emergency due to his intimacy with Mrs. Gandhi through Bharati's relationship with her Yoga guru. These kinships are questioned and anticipated wittily in the novella by Khushwant Singh in a different way with his ingenious skills of writing in the combo of surrounded rumours that the relationships were more physical rather than platonic between them.

Education in Slave India

In colonized India whereas one side people were fighting for freedom following Mahatma Gandhi credo of non-violence, celibacy and the boycott of everything foreign, some people with good fortune and reputation wanted their kids to study English to tell the British to their faces that it is time to buzz off from India and let Indians handle their own affairs. They found it the other way of bringing India honor and self respect by worsening the British in their own law.

In *Burial at Sea*, Khushwant Singh has represented such character, Krishan Lal Matto who wanted to bring up his only son Jai Bhagwan as an English aristocrat,

"in order to deal with the British, one had to speak like them, mix with them socially as an equal, learn to eat their kind of food on expensive China using silver forks and knives, and serve them premium Scotch and vintage French wines of better quality .." (Singh, 6)

Khushwant Singh's different kind of representation supporting those who had been in guilt for being a slave to English custom by anglicizing their children is utterly an illustration of his sharp intellect. Krishan Lal hired a nanny governess Valerie Bottomley from London who changes Jai Bhagwan into Victor *"the son of an English county gentleman: cravat, waistcoat, and stripped trousers... impeccable manners."* (Singh, 12) Later on because of her immense efforts, Victor gets admission in Eton and goes England to finish his higher education from there.

Gandhi's views on anglicizing children

Krishan Lal Matto was an open admirer of Mahatma Gandhi so in one of his visits, Matto asks for Gandhi's views on anglicizing his children thinking that Gandhi might oppose the idea of it. Gandhiji responds:

"I agree. We have to have some Indians who can tell the English when to get out in a language they can understand. But don't take it so far that they are ashamed of being Indian. Their roots must remain firmly embedded in Indian soil." (Singh, 8)

Matto became happy and shortly afterwards hired a nanny for his children's education. Victor being a serious minded young lad learnt everything very soon but he had not yet thought about what he would like the India of the future to be. His mind was full of such actions of "*Alexander and Napoleon and images of cars and machines*" that he had never seen in his colonized country yet. (Singh, 15) His father supported his thoughts of industrialization knowing that Gandhiji is against that. Moreover, he encouraged him not to be influence by anyone while dreaming about the constitution of modern India according to his views.

Views on industrialization

Mahatma Gandhi strongly objected to the use of machinery, since in his time machines typically led to "*the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of a few, extremely rich people.*" (Iyer, 348) Today, of course, the situation is not like that. For example, information technology has led to decentralization of power, rather than centralization of it. But in that phase where colonial India was struggling for freedom, Gandhiji felt that industrialization will increase the problem of economic equality in the country later on. In K Kripalani's book "*All Men Are Brothers*", Mahatma Gandhi tells:-

"I cannot picture to myself a time when no man shall be richer than another. But I do picture a time when the rich will spurn to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor and the poor will cease to envy the rich. Even in a most perfect world, we shall fail to avoid inequalities, but we can and must avoid strife and bitterness." (Kriplani, 136)

Gandhi supported an economic theory of simple living and self-sufficiency/import substitution. He envisioned a more agrarian India upon independence that's focal point would be meeting the material needs of its public prior to generating riches and industrialising. After Nehru, Victor Jai Bhagwan was Mahatma Gandhi's favourite Indian-a brilliant young man with the temperament of a leader and fiercely committed to his country. Though Victor adored and respected Gandhi, he disagreed with the Mahatma's vision for the future of India and moreover, he

"...contradicted everything Gandhi stood for: handspun cloth, self-sufficient villages, very basic education...wanted to see an India which had modern textile mills, steel plants, automobile factories, huge dams and thousands of miles of canals, every village connected by road, more schools, colleges and hospitals." (Singh, 16)

According to Gandhi, people "*might achieve these material ambitions but in the process lose their souls and their Indianness.*" (Singh, 19) He was also decisive about industrialization calling it an indefinite multiplication of wants. He said that the reliance on machinery will destroy man's inseparable relationship with nature; moreover, this overdependence on machinery may demolish the stable and long-established agrarian village communities which are environment-friendly and which for him constituted the core of the nation's strength, not just material, but ethical and spiritual. Gandhiji feared that people will fail in the task of sharing the available

work- and leisure time for family life and community service- equitably. Although Gandhi's original fears about machines have been confirmed unfounded, nonetheless industrialization has not mechanically led to an even-handed division of work and leisure time.

Recognition as famous business tycoon of India

While staying in England, Victor “*approached manufacturers of textile machinery; they were more than happy to sell the latest machines at reasonable prices...approached architects who had designed the mills and technicians who had installed the machines...promised to send them formal contracts...set in motion the momentous project of that would shape his own future and India's .*” (Singh, 55-56) After his return from university in England, Victor was determined to bring the benefits of modern industry to the subcontinent.

In that course of action he called a panchayat in his village and promised the villagers to give the reasonable price for the barren piece of land and to give boys and girls employment. He shares his idea with Gandhiji and asks for the establishment of mills in the country. In their discussion, Mahatma Gandhi asks Victor, “*What will happen to the millions of weavers who make a living spinning and weaving clothes?*” (Singh, 48) In the book, *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Mr. Iyer tells-

“The basic aim of Gandhian economics is to provide full employment for the poor, really for all potential members of the work force, so that these workers can provide for their own necessities by their own efforts, in dignity, without depending on charity. Gandhi was not opposed to technology, but advocated a proper mix (depending on prevailing conditions) of technology-intensive and labour-intensive production.” (Iyer, 402)

Gandhi's basically advised Victor not to rush into technologically oriented development; first make sure what impact it will have on employment and through this on the well-being of the poor people. On the other hand Victor assured him that poor people “*could be employed in the textile mills and earn more money. We could export our cloth and earn foreign exchange.*” (Singh, 49)

Then Victor set textiles mills at first, then Sugar mills followed by factories to produce chemicals, cement and bicycles, before finally investing significant capital in shipping. “*Modernize or perish was the motto he gave to Indian industrialists.*” (Singh, 60) And within a few years of India's independence, he becomes the country's biggest tycoon.

Out-shout the ideologues of colonialism and freedom struggle

Throughout all this, Victor kept himself detached from the uproar of freedom struggle. Neither he was a supporter of British Raj, nor did he have a flair for politics. People were out-shining and out-shouting ideologues of colonialism everywhere in the country at large scale but

“To victor it was more important to industrialize India, to make it economically strong. Because what freedom could there be without that?” (Singh, 61)

Victor felt that country needed much more to modernize itself. He wanted to produce more electricity to bring light in every house and to drive gadgets and machines; lay good roads, highways and rail lines to connect all cities, towns and villages. He wanted to manufacture all products from small to oversize in the country itself for the betterment of country. Victor provided funds to congress leaders whenever they needed and approached him for that through Gandhi as his enterprises were making record profits. He proved himself a freedom fighter who worked for the economy of the country as, *“he didn’t want a free India to start off as a backward, impoverished nation.”* (Singh, 62)

The after effects of India’s Independence

The British finally decided to hand India over to Indians but they split the country into two parts- Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. India got the freedom but it had positive and negative both kind of effects on the country and Victor’s personal life:

Independence’s celebration in the city and at home-

Victor didn’t take part in the independence celebrations going on in Delhi whereas *“the city was in festive mood with the Indian flag flying on all buildings and processions marching down the streets shouting slogans.”* (Singh, 76) He was not happy as what kind of future prospect he was looking at for the country was completely disturbed by partition. The only one who looked happy at his home was *“Victor’s little daughter, who went around Shanti Bhawan marching like a soldier carrying the tricoloured flag of Independent India and shouting ‘Bharat Mata ki Jai’ (Long Live Mother India!)..”* (Singh, 75)

Partition’s negative effect on the country and Victor’s home-

Khushwant Singh has depicted the after effects of partition with such rhythmic gait and a sense of believability, horror and human emotions’ dimensions. Victor had not dreamt for such freedom in his younger days. One side the whole country was burning in the fire of partition which Khushwant Singh portrays with his in-depth knowledge about the after effects of partition-

“Fratricidal war erupted on the subcontinent between Hindus and... Muslims...slitting each other’s throats from the banks of the Indus to beyond the Hooghly...the city was flooded with Hindu and Sikh refugees who had fled from Pakistan...they were living in ancient monuments, on footpaths and roundabouts.” (Singh, 75)

On the other hand, at Victor’s home, his father’s health *“was deteriorating. The babbling with which he had responded to Independence and the Partition refugees had forced everyone to confront the obvious....he had become absent-minded and had bouts of depression..”* (Singh, 76) Victor felt too secluded than ever before because the country had been distorted into something terribly unrecognizable by the British, the Congress and the Muslim League.

Revitalization by Love and Yoga

After Victor's wife death leaving a daughter behind her, he had sunk himself down in work and anguish, "*shuttled between Delhi and Bombay more frequently now and worked for almost sixteen hours a day...Mattoo, approaching seventy and badly affected by Jaishree's death, was growing indifferent to office work, and Victor had to take on his shoulders.*" (Singh, 69) He passed a long period of his life solitary in the company of his yacht Jai Bharati. But now after partition he sensed that his father's days were also numbered and too less. He truly comprehended the meaning of loneliness in those days of his father's serious condition.

After his father's death, he worked for several years and finally his daughter paved his path taking over the business. Meanwhile he meets a tantric woman Durgeshwari whose company and yoga lessons prove somewhat remedial for Victor in his angst of business mechanical routine. She revives his sexual instinct bringing monsoon in his life-

"Black clouds ...may announce their arrival with lightening followed by claps of thunder. Or silently spread them across the sky and send down a gentle drizzle, before they open up their water sacks into a downpour. People rejoice: the sea loses its torpor. Angry waves build up in the bay and come surging towards the shore." (Singh, 144)

Khushwant Singh has skillfully used the metaphors of black clouds for arrival of monsoon with lightning and thunder claps which expresses arrival of joyfulness and contentment in life. Durgeshwari moved to Delhi with her pet veteran tiger Sheroo upon Victor's request. She was the one who introduced him the pleasures of unbridled sexuality and invigorated him physically with all her love and yoga exercises. Through specific symbols the author has tried to express the psychological conditions of Victor's mind how his life was filled with sadness and loneliness.

Assassination and Burial into Arabian Sea

When Durgeshwari left, life again became depressive for him. "*The dark clouds and cool breeze filled him with great longing and greater sadness. He began to feel old again.*" (Singh, 145) Unexpectedly one day he was shot dead by some goons because of some business rifts. According to his will, after a funeral march his body was surrendered to the Arabian sea-

"Faint notes of a military band playing the Funeral March led the procession to the bottom of Walkeshwar Hill at Chowpatty. Crowds lined both sides of Marine drive. People stood on their balconies showering rose petals on the bier as it passed below them; women sobbed and shed tears for a man....whose presence they had felt around them all their lives." (Singh, 2)

The story has been dexterously ended by the author with Victor's assassination and started with his burial at Arabian Sea in between the royal treatment and training of him to be westernized through a highly civilized governess from London; his stay in posh area of London getting higher education, then finally emerging as leading business tycoon of India struggling for independence.

Conclusion

Burial at Sea turns us towards the Indian history where Victor represented those all young men who were fiercely committed to the country and fought either physically or economically for the freedom and industrialization. If people had not anglicized children and established industries in that period, India would not have become economically stronger and independent. Moreover, Khushwant Singh's architectonic skills to build the edifice of the events and consequences of Indian partition in combo of his profound critical insight into human emotions are perfectly traced through the excerpts from his novels. This paper has been made more out of the ordinary, evaluative and informative with his mastery of presenting human deeds with the hidden idea in that.

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