



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

SUPERSTITION VERSUS RATIONALISM DEPICTED IN KHUSHWANT SINGH'S 'THE MARK OF VISHNU'

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Abstract: The paper aims to focus on superstitious beliefs of old generation people and rational and scientific attitude of new generation people. Khushwant Singh through his story 'The Mark of Vishnu' represents the conflict between science and religion, faith and logic, tradition and modernity. It is a narrative story about Gunga Ram, an old illiterate Brahman. He has some superstitious beliefs which causes his doom. This paper highlights that how rationalism, logic, and scientific fact prevail against old-fashioned superstitions.

KEYWORDS: Superstition, venomous, Phannar, Mark of Vishnu

"The Mark of Vishnu" is a short story which was published in *The Mark of Vishnu and Other Stories* in 1950 by Khushwant Singh, an Indian novelist, lawyer, journalist, Politician and short story writer. He is the recipient of Padma Vibhusan in 2007, the second highest civilian award. He is renowned short story writer for his stories as- 'Karma', 'The Mark of Vishnu', 'The Portrait of A Lady', 'The Voice of God', 'Kusum', 'Death Comes to Daulat Ram', 'The Insurance Agent' etc. He used irony, humour and satire to make his stories pleasant and interesting. He used Indian characters that belong to various strata of society and do various jobs. It is his magnum opus novel 'Train to Pakistan' earned him fame.

In India, Superstition is considered a widespread social problem. Here in India, Superstitious beliefs and Science go hand-in-hand. According to Cambridge University, Science is (Knowledge from) the careful study of the structure and behaviour of the physical world, especially by watching, measuring, and doing experiments, and the development of theories to describe the results of these activities. Superstition means belief that is not based on human reason or scientific knowledge, but is connected with old ideas about magic. Even though we sent rocket into space, we fret if a black cat crosses our path. We progress in the field of science and technology, but the belief of the people over superstitions still exists in the society. We have some beliefs as a black cat crossing the road symbolizes bad luck, seeing a mongoose symbolizes to be very lucky, itchy palms mean that money is coming your way. Etc. We try to alter the age long beliefs but that sticks so fast that we can not change it.

Superstitious belief plays a crucial role in the life of the central character Gunga Ram in the story 'The Mark of Vishnu'. The story weaves around life of Gunga Ram, an old Brahman who is illiterate and superstitious and his superstitious beliefs cause his doom. Major themes of the story are clash between tradition vs modernity, reason vs superstition, faith vs logic, literate vs illiterate. All these themes knit into a well weaved tapestry. The story fails to draw a line between religious faith and superstitious belief. The author highlights the irrational ways of maintaining religious rituals through character portrayal of Ganga Ram who represents "all Hindus".

At the opening of the story, Gunga Ram, a superstitious Brahmin pours milk in the saucer and places it before Kala Nag. He feels satisfied to find it empty the next morning. He has strong belief that as long as he would feed the snake, it would not harm anyone. His superstitious belief is teased by the young boys of the village. They ridicule his superstitious belief saying scientific fact that snakes don't drink milk as they have been taught by the teacher that snakes do not eat daily. Quoting an example, boy's remark: "We saw a grass snake which had just swallowed a frog. It stuck like a blob in its throat and took several days to dissolve and go down its tail" (13). These lines and several others highlight the generation gap between Gunga Ram and the boys, his illiteracy and their knowledge, his superstitious faith and their logic, and his traditional way of believing and their modern approach of challenging existing beliefs. Gunga Ram merely shuts his eyes for pious honour and warns the boys for inviting Gods wrath for making fun of secret creature like snakes. He has blind folded reverence for all creatures as venomous also. This thing prevents him to make distinction between dangerous and innocent. He was highly superstitious and believed that "all life was sacred, even if it was of a serpent or scorpion or centipede" (13). He never allowed beating secret creature. Though these creatures beat him and stung him. This accounts for Gunga Ram's deep regard for snakes.

His faith find particularly on Kala Nag on one occasion when boys threatened Gunga Ram to kill Kala Nag. He resisted saying if you will Kill Kala Nag, he will give 100 eggs that would soon become cobras which already led. The boys reply that they will capture all the Nagas and send them Bombay. They will sell all cobras for anti snake bite serum. They said – 'The Phannar is the male, so it couldn't have laid hundred eggs. You must have laid the eggs yourself.' (14) The boys ridicule for his blind and unflinching devotion towards snakes. Besides to all, he continues to feed cobras. He has faith in trinity of God-Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh-who are creator, preserver and destroyer respectively. His devotion was towards Lord Vishnu and every morning smeared V mark (Lord Vishnu's mark) in sandalwood paste on his forehead.

It was monsoon season, when boys finally see Kala Nag. Heavy rain flooded his hole. He came out of hole and placed on open patch. His shiny black hood glistened in the sunlight. All the boys surrounded him with bamboo sticks on hands. The boys managed to damage his back, remaining untouched the head. They put it in large biscuit tin. Being unaware of the incident, Gunga Ram, as usual took the saucer of milk for the Kala Nag and it remained untouched and the poor and devoted Gunga Ram sensed the danger. Next morning they hailed Gunga Ram indicating that the tin contained Kala Nag. 'here's your Kala Nag. Safe in this box. We are going to put him in spirit'.(15) Gunga Ram became speechless and helpless. We can see the influence of M.K. Gandhi on Gunga Ram not being violent towards the boys. They gave the tin to Science teacher with immense sense of pride and achievement. When the teacher opened the box in which the snake was captured, the lid flew off from his hands resulting in the escape of snake. "As soon

as the cord was loosened the lid flew into the air, just missing the teacher's nose. There was Kala Nag. His eyes burnt like embers and his hood was taut and undamaged" (16). Teacher was surprised. The boys enjoyed the scene with laughing and yelling. Though the back of the snake was damaged, the hood was undamaged, and therefore he was able to drag himself towards the threshold. Gunga Ram was already was standing there with saucer and jug of milk. No sooner he saw Nag, he poured the milk in the saucer and placed it near to it. He also asked for divine

forgiveness for the injury done to the Kala Nag. Kala Nag Hissed and heat Gunga Ram on his forehead. He groaned in agony and pain. The poison blinded him instantly. Froth appeared in his mouth, wiped away by the teacher. Underneath was V mark of Gunga Ram where Kala Nag dug him. Gunga Ram fell down and died.

In the story of R.K.Narayan “A Snake in the Grass” we can observe many superstitious beliefs as– after a cobra enters the family’s yard and the lose track of it in the grass, an old woman claims that this is a sign for the deity Murugan, who is associated with snakes in Hinduism. As the family seeks to appease this deity, offering the snake some milk is a necessary ritualistic practice. Additinally in India snakes are not to be harmed if possible. In the play of Girish Karnad, ‘Naga Mandala’ certain belifs regarding the nagas are presented.

Here Gunga Ram did not listen to the boys when they contradicted his superstitious knowledge with logical reasons. His superstitious nature and illogical faith caused him to die painfully. Gunga Ram becomes the symbol of rigid traditions which do not change under any circumstance. He represents all the superstitious people especially of the Indian society who did not question the existing beliefs. Boys on the other hand represented the modernity, logic and reason. Whenever boys argued, they quoted logical reasons in support of their argument. Here the generation gap is represented. The replacement of mark of V in sandalwood paste by mark of V by snake also represents end of old traditions and emergence of new traditions full of logic. Though he loves and reveres Kala Nag, but his love and reverence emanate from the superstition and improper comprehension of his deity. This shows how the serpent, if viewed irrationally and ignorantly, turns into a destroyer.

The title is symbolic as “The Mark of Vishnu” means the divine function of preservation of life on Earth. But here the irony, the “Mark of Vishnu is implied as the ‘mark of snake bite’.

The story is the reflection of the society which is enslaved by superstition. The character of Gungaram is true reflection of many such people in the Indian society who, under spell of superstition, disbelieve the proven concepts of Science and put many lives at risk.

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