

## The Mark of Vishnu: A Critical Study

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### Abstract

The paper aims to study The Mark of Vishnu by Khushwant Singh critically and unfold every aspect of the work. The work is a critique of superstitions and blind faith which lead to disaster. A detailed analysis of plot, themes, symbols etc. has also been made. The paper also unravels the story as an account lost human values which is represented by the boys in the story.

**KEYWORDS:** Superstition, mark of Vishnu, Kala Nag, modernity.

“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 was popular for his trenchant secularism, sarcasm, humor and his love for poetry. His comparisons of behavioural and social characteristics of westerners and Indians are fastened with dark wit. The story narrates the life of Gunga Ram, an old Brahman who is illiterate and superstitious and his superstitious beliefs cause his doom. Singh used common man’s language to make it suitable for every person where he combined descriptive dialogues with the narrative. The plot develops as conversation between Gunga Ram and the boys and Singh has highlighted different social aspects through their conversation. The story encompasses various themes, symbols, humour and irony.

The plot discusses Gunga Ram, a superstitious Brahmin who was devoted to Lord Vishnu and smeared V mark (Lord Vishnu’s mark) in sandalwood paste on his forehead. The narrator, on the other hand along with his brother teased him for his superstitious beliefs. Gunga Ram believed that “all life was sacred, even if it was of a serpent or scorpion or centipede” (13). Among all these he had a great regard for the snakes particularly the Kala Nag. He would place saucer full of milk every night near its dwelling and feel satisfied to find it empty the next morning. He held strong belief that as long as he would feed the snake it would not harm anyone. One day when Gunga Ram was not home boys found 6 feet Kala Nag in an open patch, caught it in a box after breaking its back and took it to school. When Ram found that the cobra was missing, he immediately went to school to rescue King cobra. Meanwhile in the classroom “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). Causing much havoc and fury in the classroom, the snake immediately dragged itself towards the door. Gunga Ram arrived and while noticing the snake coming towards the door, Gunga Ram poured milk in a saucer and placed it for the snake; knelt and folded his hands for forgiveness. But Kala Nag bit Gunga Ram all over his forehead and left. Ram fell down and died. When teacher wiped Gunga Ram’s forehead, he saw the V mark which the snake had dug his fangs.

In first reading, the story looks like the story of a man who fell prey to his superstitions but a critical study unfolds various layers of other aspects. 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 starts with the superstitious beliefs of Gunga Ram which is continuously challenged by boys. Gunga Ram begins the narrative with milk in his hands and his opening dialogue is about the Kala Nag, his obsession. He pours milk for the snake and believes that the snake drinks it every day which is criticized by the boys who are of the view that it would be the cat drinking that milk for they have been taught by the teacher that snakes do not eat daily. Quoting an example, boy remarks: "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 on held beliefs and their modern approach of challenging existing beliefs.

Towards the end of the short story, even after getting warnings from Gunga Ram, boys caught the snake on a rainy day when Gunga Ram was not home and took it to school after breaking its back with sticks for laboratory. Gunga Ram hurried to school with milk and saucer on finding that the boys took the snake to school. When the teacher was opening the box in which the snake was captured, the lid flew off from his hands resulting in the escape of snake. Meanwhile, Gunga Ram reached and knelt in front of the king cobra placed milk and folded hands in apology. But the snake bit him on his forehead continuously until he fell down and died. After the snake left, the teacher wiped his forehead and found that the snake bit him in the mark of V.

Gunga Ram did not listen to boys even when they contradicted his superstitious knowledge with logical reasons. Gunga tried to comfort the ferocious king cobra with milk and apology as if it would know his kneeling and remorse. His superstitious nature and illogical faith caused him to die painfully.

Khushwant Singh has carefully placed light and humorous episodes throughout the story which either comes from the ignorance of Gunga Ram or through irony. First comes the name of Gunga Ram, it itself is ironical as Gunga means a person who cannot speak. Singh deliberately choose this name to represent a person who becomes dumb because of his ignorance. Further irony is found in Gunga Ram's being a Brahmin, and a Brahmin's being ignorant, because the literal meaning of Brahmin is 'learned person' which is not the case in this story. Although he is represented as a faithful devotee and highly revered and believed in trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; every morning he used to put a V mark in Sandalwood paste on his forehead to honor deity but was ignorant and illiterate and never tried to believe beyond his existing beliefs.

Khushwant Singh skillfully incorporated humor without making a digression from the original tragic plot. For instance, when boys make fun of the snake, Gunga Ram "shut his eyes in pious horror", the selection of the words "pious horror" creates humor. Besides his ignorance when boys say that they would kill the Kala Nag and he replies that it laid a hundred eggs and killing it would result in the development of all those eggs into cobras and describes the Kala Nag as phannyar (hooded). To which boys call him liar for

the phannyar is the male cobra and satirically remark that those must be Gunga Ram's eggs and they would have hundreds of Gunga Rams.

Symbolism plays major role in making a work valuable as it veils true meaning under the surface meaning and is unveiled after a critical reading only. In "The Mark of Vishnu", various symbols are present: Gunga Ram, boys, Kala Nag, mark of Vishnu.

Gunga Ram becomes the symbol of rigid traditions which do not change under any circumstance. He is fully superstitious and throughout the story is presented as an ignorant man. He represents all the superstitious people especially of the Indian society who did not question the existing beliefs. When Khushwant Singh wrote this story, elder people of India were mostly illiterate and were staunch followers of their blind faith. So, Singh wrote it as a satirical critique of his contemporary society. Boys on the other hand represented the modernity, logic and reason. Whenever boys argued, they quoted logical reasons in support of their argument. A high contrast has been depicted between the boys and Gunga Ram which represent the generation gap. Whenever boys tried to put authentic reasons, Gunga Ram did not listen to them. He cared for every life even if it was scorpion, or centipede, boys on the other hand did not care for anything neither even the sentiments of Gunga Ram and continuously made fun of an old illiterate man. This contrast also depicts the lost human values which decreased in India with modernity. Kala Nag or the King cobra represents untamed nature in the story, it is highly revered by Gunga Ram but when it is in a fury, it kills him, just like the nature whose havoc and wrath does not spare nature lovers or haters. Mark of Vishnu which is also the title of this work represents Gunga Ram's strong faith in the God Vishnu and same mark with the fangs of snake symbolize that no matter how strong is the faith, but if it is blind and illogical, it would lead to doom. 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 devoid of values.

Considering every aspect, "The Mark of Vishnu" by Khushwant Singh presents the critical picture of a superstitious person whose blind faith causes his death. It is a satire on superstitions and blind faith and also on the lost human values.

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