

## Delhi : A Historical Novel

Vikas Jaoolkar

(Prof. & Head)

Department of English

Govt. Hamidia P.G. College, Bhopal

Tanuja Sharma

Research Scholar

B.U. Bhopal

### ABSTRACT

Khushwant Singh's third novel, Delhi, first published by Penguin Book in 1990, has been written with a totally journalistic approach to sell. In this novel the narrator is a Sikh with a dyed beard and obsessed with history, sex and anecdotes. Not conforming strictly to the novelistic parameters, this novel is in the form of a tourist guide, selecting historical episodes connected mostly with the tourist places, known or unknown, Muslim period ruins, domes and mosques and tourist sites of Muslim-ruled India, giving rise to a suspicion that the author has foreign readers in mind. The novelist uses a special kind of narrative technique of interior monologue and the narration alternates between the past and the present. Autobiographical element has been added to it.

### Introduction

Khushwant Singh is obsessed with typical coarse India nakedness in his style, usages and observations, the only respectable / palatable answer is that this genius loves to be that only. He writes consciously and chooses his vocabulary conscientiously. This magnum opus Delhi is an example of his outlandish traits. Khushwant Singh's Delhi narrates several histories, not one history about the city of Delhi. Bhagmati, as the chief persona, acts as the counterbalancing force to the all pervasive violence that marks the history of Delhi. It is a celebration of the unique power of a culture and civilization, the power to generate some of the finer values of life, the power to ensure the survival of these values in face of a nation's collective debasement and the power to ensure that when all is lost an awareness of that loss remains. The past and the present alternate in Delhi and the entire novel rotates around Bhagmati and the past of Delhi in its every chapter.

### Story / Plot / Them -

The novelist travels through time, space and history picking up threads of his choice to suit to the canvass of his narration. In his journey, the author has skipped over important events and personages of the past and contemporary India. The chosen historical events and personages are only a cover for the message the author wants to give for the future and

the lesson to be learnt from the past. The novel is a tourist guide version of history, the facts being available in any book of history, but this history is added with spicy tales by the author – narrator who keeps a date with tourist more often trying to seduce them and also getting presents from them.

The narrator who claims himself to be one of the lover of Delhi maintains that both Delhi and Bhagmati reveal their true selves. This infatuation of the novelist with Delhi and Bhagmati is symbolic of the legendary love of Majnu and Laila. The past and the present alternate in Delhi and the entire novel rotates around Bhagmati and the past of Delhi in its every chapter. The past illuminates the present and the present gives a peep into the past.

### Characters -

Bhagmati as the central character acts as the counterbalancing force to the all pervasive violence that marks the history of Delhi. Bhagmati is a eunuch. That Bhagmati symbolizes Delhi and that the narrator is in love with her. Khushwant Singh gives the reason in an interview for making a hijra the symbol for Delhi. The hijra stands for a symbol of sterility. It can never conceive and was a wonderful symbol for a city in which so much has happened with Delhi all that has happened to it in the way of violence, in the way of change of dynasties, it has still not produced anything as great as one would have expected of it. The special

kind of narrative technique leaves its readers impressed at the author's comprehension of the mind of personages, such as Dara Shikoh, Aurangzeb, Amir Khusrau, Mussaddi Lal, Kayastha, Taimur, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Jaita Rangreta, Nadir Shah etc, who have been given a somewhat sympathetic treatment.

The novelist has given a new angle to the treatment of three characters, Taimur, Aurangzeb and Nadir Shah who in their interior monologues have bared their real intention for invading India and ascending to the throne of Delhi. There are in the novel as many as nine historical chapters of these seven are monologues of ordinary men who include Musaddi Lal, Jaita Rangreta, Meer Taqi Meer, Alice Aldwell, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Nihal Singh and Such other people as narrate the events of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Narrative Technique -**

All the episodes of history are narrated in first person by the protagonist to give the narration the intensity of authenticity. Each episode is co-related with the Bhagmati episode to provide an easy access to past and present. The tone changes along with the mood and one gets surprised reading of Khwaja if it is the same writer who wrote the earlier pages of Delhi. Khushwant Singh uses a special kind of narrative technique the technique of interior monologue. Khushwant Singh presents ruthless invaders, such as Nadir Shah, Taimur and Aurangzeb, to speak for themselves, offering in a way, self apologies. They narrate in detail as to what prompted them to undertake the war journey, how they fought, plundered, killed the countless people and were offered huge wealth. All was done in the name of Islam, to bring the infidels to the path of religion and do good to them and yet they had to face rebellion and as a consequence had to be heartless in causing devastation, miseries, deaths to the natives.

The author narrator treats Taimur differently. He makes him speak out his mind comprehending imaginatively his real intentions, which may appear to be fair from Taimur's own point of view, but for us it is a condemnation of him by himself. Taimur indulges in massacre in Delhi and the author – narrator in his day dream recaptures realistically the horrors caused by the marauding forces of Taimur who had slain as

many as 50,000 people. The special kind of narrative technique leaves its readers impressed at the authors comprehension of the mind of personages, such as Dara Shikoh, Aurangzeb, Amir Khusrau, Musaddi Lal kayastha, Taimur, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Jaita Rangreta, Nadir Shah etc, who have been given a somewhat sympathetic treatment. History has been treated superficially in the novel. This is a rare narrative technique in which the author – narrator has no peers. Khushwant Singh's *Delhi* narrates several histories, not one history about the city of Delhi.

### **Symbolism -**

Khushwant Singh gives the reason for making a Hijra, the symbol for Delhi. The Hijra stands for a symbol of sterility. It can never conceive. This was a wonderful symbol for a city in which so much has happened to it in the way of violence, in the way of change of dynasties, it has still not produced anything.

*Delhi* is superb in its vulgarity and myriad evils of perversity. It is also superb in symbolism of the Indian society, its contradictions, balances, caste and religious communalism, racial and ethnic strife, the spirit of unity and diversity. The stories of Rangreta, Nihal Singh, Musaddi Lal Kayastha and Bhagmati are pathetically true and revealing. Tossed between two faiths, Musaddi Lal in his helplessness compares himself with a Hijra as is the case of Bhagmati, a symbol of Delhi, for their inherent qualities to adapt themselves to any circumstances.

Through the monologue the novelist has narrated imaginatively a realistic story of the Hindus in service of the Muslim rulers. This class of Hindus is symbolic of Delhi and Bhagmati who were ill treated, ravished and left alone to care for themselves. The novelist has eugolised sufism rightly as the sufi's welcomed people of all castes and creeds and blessed them without any distinction. This philosophy is suited best to this multi religious Indian society. It is not the rigidity, but liberalism, which is the need of the present day society. Singh develops the theme of anti- Muslim feelings among the Sikhs in what is recounted by Nihal Singh as told to him by his mother. The novelist puts Nihal Singh in a better light when he shows him as an angel for a nationalist woman who had been punished for her daring to challenge the British soldiers.

He gets an order from the British officer to shoot her, but Nihal Singh manages to release her calling her as his mother as he was moved by her religiosity. Jaita Rangreta is another character who is a brilliant example of his clan. Khushwant Singh has picked up this character under the chapter “untouchables”, who tells his own story, incorporating what his babu had told him. Rangreta’s father called him a Sikh of Nanak, though he had neither seen Nanak nor the Gurus, but this had accorded him a status in his class of people. Rangreta reflects on Jahangir’s son, Shahjahan, who had ascended the throne after killing brothers. Through the story of Rangreta, the novelist exposes religious hypocrisy and exploitation of the people, especially the untouchables, in the name of religion or God. Such people are sentimentally exploited and made to understand that they are big after their initiation into the faith.

## Monuments -

Khushwant Singh’s Delhi is not a story of a hero or of a dynasty or of some happening, but it is that of a city – a city which has been a capital of many dynasties, which has witnessed many turbulent times and like phoenix has regained life after getting almost perished. All this history lies frozen in the monuments built in their respective time. These monuments remain the most authentic source to know history even when these buildings are destroyed or renovated. Singh’s ancestors being builders, he seems to have developed a special interest in architecture. It is to be noted that the author narrator in Delhi act as a guide, takes lady J.H.T, Georgina and Kamala to various monuments in Delhi, handles a T.V. Series on the scarcely visited places of Delhi and plans a book with Kamala on less known places of Delhi. Almost all prominent places of Delhi – Tilpat, Surajkund, Qutub Minar, Lal Kot, Ajmeri Gate, Shamsi Talab, Jama Masjid, Diwan-I-Khas, Diwan-I-Aam, Hauz-I-Alai, Tombs of Altmash, Alauddin Khilji, Sultan Ghori, Balban, Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, Masjid Fatehpuri, Bara Gumbad, Tomb of Badshah Humayun at Arab-Ki-Sarai, Jamali-Kamali Mosque, Auliya Masjid, Jahaz Mahal, Yusuf Sarai etc. New Delhi with its various landmarks like Viceregal palace, war memorial Arch, two secretariats is almost built in front of our eyes.

However Delhi is not a tourist Handbook but a fictional piece and all the reference to architecture is not to flaunt information but they serve some important functions in the novel.

## Conclusion -

Delhi is an outburst of a common man in Khushwant Singh who surveys the moods of different strata of the Indian milieu. The scenes change frequently and make every time Delhi a kaleidoscope a multidimensional word picture. The novel begins with a very unusual analogy where Delhi is compared to a hijda. All the episodes of history are narrated in first person by the protagonist to give the narration the intensity of an authenticity Each episode of history is co-related with the Bhagmati episode so as to provide an easy access to past and present. The novel begins with a very typical khushwant Singh style.

The history is brought to a state of standstill, as the scene shift from generation to generation, emperor to emperor and from Lalkot, Mehrauli, Shahr-I-Nam, Tughlakabad to Delhi, present to past and then to present again. The interest is sustained and the comparison between the times past and the times present continues. The present rolls back with Bhagmati and the writer. Singh’s visit to Hauz-i-Alai with Bhagmati and there being bitten by bees, transports the mind of the reader back to the pages of history. A link between the past and the present is created by the narrator. The last part of the novel Delhi looks more autobiographical than a fiction, as Khushwant Singh and his father were the major builders of the New Delhi.

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