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ISSN - 2347 - 503X

Research Chronicler

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol III Issue VII : Sept. 2015

Editor-In-Chief

Prof. K. N. Shelke

Research Chronicler

ISSN 2347 – 5021 (Print); 2347 – 503X (Online)

A Peer-Reviewed Refereed and Indexed

Multidisciplinary International Research Journal

Volume III Issue VII: September – 2015

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Single Copy	₹ 600	\$40
Annual	₹ 3000	\$200
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A Tribute to Khushwant Singh's Love: Delhi

Dr. Archana Durgesh & Ms. Shobhna Singh

*BBD NITM, Lucknow, (U.P.) India***Abstract**

"I return to Delhi as I return to my mistress Bhagmati when I have had my fill of whoring in foreign lands". Thus begins Khushwant Singh's vast, erotic, irrelevant magnum opus on the city of Delhi. The principal narrator of the saga, which extends over six hundred years, is a bawdy, ageing reprobate who loves Delhi as much as he does the hijra whore Bhagmati - half man, half woman with sexual inventiveness and energy of both the sexes. Travelling through time, space and history to 'discover' his beloved city, the narrator meets a myriad of people-poets and princes, saints and sultans, temptresses and traitors, emperors and eunuchs - who have shaped and endowed Delhi with its very special mystique and as we accompany the narrator on his epic journey we find the city of emperors transformed and immortalized in our minds forever. It is amazing that Singh who has worked on history should in this novel skip over a vast and important period of history before Balban and instead devote full four pages to give a long sermon on farting in the chapter allotted to Bhagmati in which the author-narrator is the main speaker. The most captivating details of this novel tell us about these innumerable people who lend their blood, their faith, their best and worst aspirations and actions to provide that special character, mystery, mystique to Delhi. The novel is an ode by a Delhi's son to his fascination with undying and relentless, razed and raging, crazed and craving, old and ageless, brutal and brave, buried and slaved, free and frayed, remorseless and mourning, Hindu, Islamic, Sikh and in equal measure Sufi and atheist soul or spirit of Delhi. This paper presents a critical appreciation of this novel.

Key Words: Delhi, eunuchs, energy, blood

In *Delhi* Mr. Singh again turned towards the Indian history. This time he presented the making of Delhi in different eras. *Delhi* is a tour guide to Delhi the capital of India more than a novel and the events teller is a Sikh who takes the different characters to different places of Delhi and tells the related incidents to that place. Timurid, Aurangzeb Alamgir, Nadir Shah, Hazrat Nizamuddin, Bahadur Shah Zafar and Meer Taqi Meer are the historical characters, who discuss their secret lives with the readers. The writer brought the lives of religious people also in light like Hazrat Nizamuddin and Sarmad Shah. Mr. Singh unveiled the cruel side of Aurangzeb's picture that he executed the ninth guru of Sikhs.

Mr. Singh spiced up the tasteless subject like history with the love making scenes. He

aspired to peep inside the private lives of Mughal kings and queens. Bhagmati a eunuch represents Delhi and the related chapters do not let the readers get bored. Mr. Singh extends the history from Mughal to British and then to the emergency after the assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. One of her Sikh security guards killed her. In revenge the people from Indira's side started killing the Sikh everywhere in India but the scene was worst in Delhi. The Sikhs were butchered mercilessly. Through this novel again Mr. Singh registered his protest against the irregularity and brought the political errors of mid eighties into the light. Narrative is a telling of some true or fictitious event or connected sequence of events, recounted by a narrator to a narratee (although there may be more than one of

each). Narratives are to be distinguished from descriptions of qualities, states, or situations, and also from dramatic enactments of events (although a dramatic work may also include narrative speeches). A narrative will consist of a set of events (the story) recounted in a process of narration (or discourse), in which the events are selected and arranged in a particular order (the plot). The category of narratives includes both the shortest accounts of events (e.g. the cat sat on the mat, or a brief news item) and the longest historical or biographical works, diaries, travelogues, etc., as well as novels, ballads, epics, short stories, and other fictional forms. In the study of fiction, it is usual to divide novels and shorter stories into first person narratives and third person narratives. As an adjective, 'narrative' means 'characterized by or relating to storytelling'.

Delhi, is Khushwant Singh's third novel, first published by Penguin Books India Limited in 1990, and has been written with a totally journalistic approach to sell. In fact, the book is "sex on sale", containing an anecdotal version of history. In this novel the narrator is a Sikh with dyed beard and obsessed with history, sex and anecdotes. Not conforming strictly to the novelistic parameters, this book 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 however uses a special kind of narrative technique of interior monologue and the narration alternates

between the past and the present. Besides, autobiographical element has been added to it. The narrative technique also includes the use of relevant Urdu couplets and translation into English of Hindi phrases to enliven the narration in which rules of restraint in expression of obscenity and crudity have more been flouted than followed. In the author's own admission: It may read like a 'Fucking Man's Guide to Delhi: Past and Present', but that is not what I mean it to be.

This confession and profession of intention by the novelist appears mysterious to the readers, as *Delhi* and *Bhagmati*, the HIJDA whore with power of both the sexes, sound both mysterious and alluring. The novelist known for his love for sex has bluntly dealt with all kind of perversities and described it with its horrifying nakedness and used filthy epithets which make the conscience of the readers itch. The main theme of the novel is history, history confined to portrayal of Delhi in certain periods of history under certain rulers, history which is not all inclusive but selective. The novelist is also strictly personal and whimsical in selection of the period of history, encompassing six centuries, personages and commoners.

The novelist travels through time, space and history picking up threads of this choice to suit to the canvass of his narration. In his journey, however, the author has skipped over important events and personages of the past and contemporary India and as such authenticity of history, as detailed by him, may be questioned. But to chosen historical events and personages is only a cover for the message the author wants to give for the future and the lesson to be learnt from the past. The book is in the nature of a guide for

the tourists. The author has worked as such. From his experiences as a guide, the author says: It was not very hard work. After I had memorized the names of a few dynasties and emperors and the years when they ruled, all I had to do was to pick up a few anecdotes to spice my stories.

This passage explains the mode of selection of the period of history, the rules, anecdotes and spices added which the novel under study contains. The author thus has given the history, time and space the form of a novel which is the product of his knowledge in the intricacies of a successful guide. In this endeavor, his vast travel experience, meeting with men and women of diverse countries with varied food habits and manners, has come handy and his expert knowledge of English and felicity of writing together with his literary and journalistic bent of mind added flavour to the narration. In fact what follows in the novel in the form of history, places and anecdotes has been described by the author himself in the paragraph below: At the Qutub Minar I told them of the number of suicides that had taken place and how no one could jump clear of the tower to come down in one piece. I told them of Humayun's father, Babar, going round his son's sickbed four times praying to Allah to transfer his son's illness to him and how Humayun had been restored to health and Babar died a few years later. About the Red Fort and its palaces I had picked up a lot of interesting details from the times Shah Jahan built it the kings who had sat on the peacock throne and were later blinded and murdered; the British who had taken it after Mutiny of 1857; the trials of INS officers, down to 15 August

1947 when Lord Mountbatten had lowered the Union jack and Nehru hoisted the Tricolour on the ramparts. Having once done my homework, there was little more to do to impress the tourists with my learning.

The first VVIP visitor, Lady Hoity-Toity, famous archaeologist and cousin of the Queen, whom Khushwant Singh conducts as a tourist guide, is said to be interested in archaeological sites. The author-narrator is told about his assignment: "She wants to examine some old sites to see if she can dig up something." This explains that the novel is a tourist guide version of history, the fact being available in any book of history, but this history is added with spicy tales by the author-narrator who keeps a date with tourists more often trying to seduce them and also getting presents from them. The mischievous bent of mind of the author-narrator who does not miss an opportunity to flirt with the woman he acts as her guide may be noticed in the following: She leaps out of bed stark naked: small wrinkled breasts; nipple looking downward and dejected; wrinkled belly with a slightly paunch beneath the navel; scraggy brown pubic hair. I put the gown round her shoulders and close my hands over her breasts.

But Sardarji (the novelist) has already hit his mark. The lady returns to him from the bathroom, puts her hands on his shoulder and demands: Don't be cross. I'm a bit of a cock-teaser. She gives a smelly kiss on the nose to seal her forgiveness. And this is because she had initially objected to Sardarji being bold with her: On the other hand, the author-narrator has pictured Bhagmati, the hijda whore, thus: Delhi and Bhagmati have

a lot in common. Having been misused by rough people they have learnt to conceal their seductive charm under a mask of repulsive ugliness.

The narrator who claims himself to be one of the lovers of Delhi maintains that both Delhi and Bhagmati “reveal their true selves” only to their lovers. This infatuation of the novelist with Delhi and Bhagmati is symbolic of the legendary love of Majnu with Laila. No wonder, Singh loves Delhi with all its ugliness as he in the role of a guide, especially for foreign VIPs and VVIPs, had to sell the history of Delhi and he could not do it without having a basic sound knowledge of such stretches of history, spanning some 600 years, as may interest his clients; and to arouse their interest in antiquities he had to add spices to make his narration absorbing. These sundry jottings on historical periods, personages and manners, surroundings and historical monuments have been weaved into a gripping story. The past and the present alternate in Delhi and the entire novel rotate 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. This 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, Musaddi Lal Kayastha, Timur, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Jaita Rangreta, Nadir Shah and others who have been given a somewhat sympathetic treatment. History has been treated superficially in the novel. Its quantum is only that which generally is interpreted to the foreigners on their on the spot conducted tours of historical sites and

places of interest which may interest them as sell.

The novelist, however, has given a new angle to the treatment of three characters, Timur, Aurangzeb and Nadir Shah who in their interior monologues have based their real intention for invading India and ascending to the throne of Delhi. This is a rare narrative technique in which the author-narrator has no peers. 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 20th century. Besides, historical personages have been dealt with in three chapters and they are Timur, Aurangzeb and Nadir Shah who in their interior monologues explain to the readers the driving forces and impulses behind their actions. Here the novelist is at his best in imaginatively portraying the real intent of the trio for invading India and in the final analysis they are made to concede that greed for power and wealth together with religious fanaticism goaded them to undertake a long and arduous journey to gain victory over India and rule it.

It is amazing that Singh who has worked on history should in this novel skip over a vast and important period of history before Balban and instead devote full four pages to give a long sermon on farting in the chapter allotted to Bhagmati in which the author-narrator is the main speaker. O.P. Mathur notes: In fact, he has skipped over large and significant areas of the history of Delhi before Balban, all the Hindu rulers, a

number of Muslim rulers including some of the Moghuls, the gradual rise of the East India Company, the Quit India Movement, the Indian Independence and Partition, and the China War and the two Pakistani wars. Among the events of more recent history, while the Kashmir problem and Emergency have been totally ignored, inordinately long space has been given to the Punjab problem and the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. This observation corroborates fully my earlier stand-point that only that part of Delhi's history has been chosen for delineation which may interest the foreign tourists and readers and which had inspired the author to include in the book and as such he is very selective and the selection is as per his like and dislikes. The narrator's sermon on farting is out of context, but the observations and anecdotes are interesting. This adds sense of humour and also enlightens the readers on the forms and types of farting. As usual, Singh has introduced sex in his delineation on farting. The narrator says: Farting is one of the three great joys of life. First sex; second oil rubbed in a scalp full of dandruff; third, a long satisfying fart. Regarding the novel being a tourist guide with spicy materials, O.P. Mathur comments: Singh's deep love for Delhi makes him to work for twenty years, as he says, to write a novel on its past, a novel sui generis, a portrayal of the historical times, some of the important rulers and some unknown commoners through their own words, and the whole suffused with the author's personality and views. It is a remarkable tour de force. Besides, commenting on the selection of periods from history, personages and commoners, Mathur

in the same article observes: The basis on which events and characters have been selected for delineation seems to be only the novelist's personal predilection and the extent of inspiration provided to him by them.

He further says: Such a puzzling selection of events and persons seems to arise only from the author's whims which have made his celebration of Delhi so lopsided and unrepresentative. Thus Delhi is as far as its basic historical material is concerned, at last a series of haphazard and whimsical forays into the past and contemporary history of Delhi. Mathur is absolutely right as the novelist while writing about the Punjab and the anti Sikh riots of 1984 in Delhi has taken upon himself the job of historian and looked at the events from a Sikh psyche, using filthy languages and unseemly expressions. He is not suggestive, but crude in descriptive details incorporating filthy Hindi abuses, such as "bahinchod", "madrchod" (Sister-fucker and mother-fucker). Bhagmati on the role of police during the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi, reports to the author-narrator: "Police? 'She asks contemptuously': Those bahinchods are with the mobs." "We give you thirty-six hours to finish every Sikh in the city" they tell them. It is popularly believed that police played a partisan role in the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. But a writer of the stature of Singh instead of being carried away by Sikh sentiments should have observed, as a responsible citizen, restraint in his expressions. His returning of the Government of India Award after the Blue Star Operation and subsequent riots in Delhi was not a mild rebuff to the Government of the day.

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ISSN - 2347 - 503X

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