

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 10 October 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

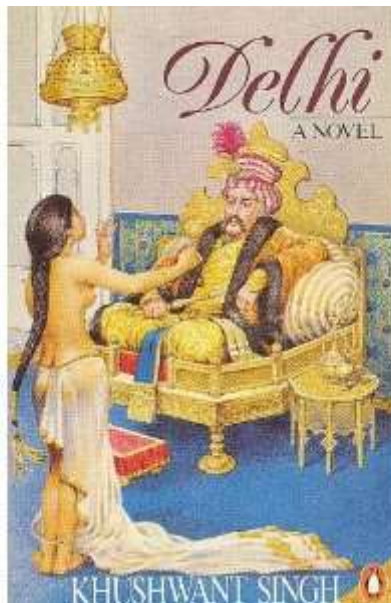
G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

Revisiting the Political History of Delhi in Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel*

Gopal Verma, Ph.D. Scholar



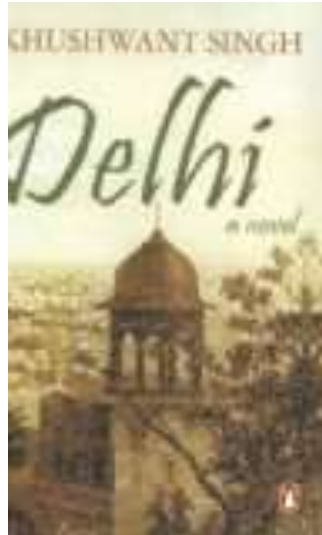
Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Gopal Verma, Ph.D. Scholar

Revisiting the Political History of Delhi in Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel*

Composed of Different Narratives



Delhi: A Novel has been composed of different narratives holding up a single plot. There is one principal narrator who unites the various episodes from Delhi's past. It is a collection of ten episodes covering 700 years of Delhi's history from 1265 A.D. to 1984 A.D. covering all the major incidents that gave Delhi his present shape. Any discourse of Delhi must invoke the narrative mode that builds up the assumptions, cultural moorings, sexual taboos and fetishes.

Anita Singh in her article "Inscription of the Repressed: Khushwant Singh's *Delhi*" says:

The novel embraces a large number of autonomous, dissonant voices unintruded by the anonymous narrator, a Sikh. Travelling in time, space and history he discovers his beloved city Delhi: her invasions and possessions are revealed through the network of intricate metaphors. Delhi is a site/text/persona that assumes multiple identities. (Anita Singh, 199)

The Principal Narrator



Khuswant Singh

The principal narrator is an unnamed Sikh who has just landed in Delhi after his fill of whoring in foreign lands. He loves Delhi as much as he loves the hermaphrodite (hijda) prostitute Bhagmati. After a hiatus and accommodating himself in the city, he takes up a job of a royal tourist guide, as he is quite well-acquainted with the city, when he takes an American girl on a round trip of the city, suggests that he is anything but a gentleman, after the narrator sets out for guiding a teenager foreigner Girl Georgine his sexual pervert side is shown when he says, “Girls are more easy to seduce when they are sixteen than they are a year or two older. At sixteen they are unsure of themselves and grateful for any reassurance of their looks or their brain—either will do (472).” This remark shows that flirting and eve-teasing are his forte and he enjoys the company of women.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Gopal Verma, Ph.D. Scholar

Revisiting the Political History of Delhi in Khushwant Singh’s *Delhi: A Novel*

Bhagmati

In *Bhagmati*—a dark, scruffy hijda from Lal Kuan – the protagonist finds a hugely satisfying bed-partner. What follows is not just an endless description of their libidinous adventures in bed. *Bhagmati*, whom narrator finds oozing with sex appeal despite her ugliness is not a simply a character who serves as a sexual partner for the narrator but is an intrinsic chain in the historical narration of Delhi's past. She is the *sutradhar* who forms a link between various ages. Their relationship symbolizes narrator's long and emotional association with Delhi; he belongs to Delhi and *Bhagmati*. He is so close to Delhi that despite its filthy outlook he cannot escape it, "To the stranger Delhi may appear like a gangrenous accretion of noisy bazaars and mean looking hovels growing around a few tumbled down forts and mosques along a dead river." (365)

Linking the Past and the Present Alternately

Narrator has linked different episodes belonging to past and present by alternately around 'Bhagmati' in the novel. *Bhagmati* also represents present state of Delhi which has been ragged and used by one and all whosoever mounted them and thus starts the real history of Delhi.

Political Fiction

In layman's language, political fiction is a subgenre of fiction that deals with political affairs and often uses narrative to provide commentary on political events, systems and theories, the novel has socio-political setting with historic-political characters. A political novel is one in which political ideas play a dominant role instead of any character(s) and the focus of the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Gopal Verma, Ph.D. Scholar

Revisiting the Political History of Delhi in Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel*

novelist is primarily on the political ideas/characters. Works of political fiction often “directly criticize an existing society or... present an alternative, sometimes fantastic, reality.” In political novels, the characters can be fictional or real or a mixture of both.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes political novel as no more than “A fictitious political narrative, about imaginary politicians.” Edmund Morris Speare defines a political novel as:

It is a work of prose fiction which leans rather to ‘ideas’ than to ‘emotions;’ which deals rather with the machinery of law-making or with a theory about public conduct than with the merits of any given piece of legislation; and where the main purpose of the writer is party propaganda, public reform, or exposition of the lives of the personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government. In this exposition the drawing-room is frequently used as a medium for presenting the inside life of politics. (Speare, ix)

According to Irving Howe political novel is “... a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which a political milieu is the dominant setting. Perhaps it would be better to say: a novel in which we take to be dominant political ideas or the political milieu.” (Howe 19) It as a work of internal tension where the conflict of ideas between the powerful and the common, results in the physical tension revealed through human behaviour and feelings:

The political novel – I have in mind its “ideal” form – is peculiarly a work of internal tensions. To be a novel at all, it must contain the usual representation of human behavior and feeling; yet it must also absorb into its stream of

movement the hard and perhaps insoluble pellets of modern ideology. The novel deals with moral sentiments, with passions and emotions; it tries, above all, to capture the quality of concrete experience. Ideology, however, is abstract, as it must be, and therefore likely to be recalcitrant whenever an attempt is made to incorporate it into the novel's stream of sensuous impression. The conflict is inescapable: the novel tries to confront experience in its immediacy and closeness, while ideology is by its nature general and inclusive. Yet it is precisely from this conflict that the political novel gains its interest and takes on the aura of high drama. (Howe 20)

Delhi – Dealing with Political History

Delhi is a novel which deals directly with political history and provides a commentary on the events of more than six centuries. The story begins in the present and after three initial sections goes back to thirteenth century. From there onwards the story alternates between the past and the present. Whereas the past depicts the socio-political happenings of the preceding centuries, the present shows the impact of the events then and at present. The novelist not only talks about society and its social norms but also about acute political turbulence, the accession of various kings, the killing of kings and their kinsmen, court intrigues, and sexual profligacy.

The First Sequence

In the very first historical sequence Mussadi Lal Kayasth of 13th century (1265) unveils the post effects of the invasion of Muhammad Gouri and the sparing of his life after being caught alive by Hindu king Prithvi Raj Chauhan. Kayasth recollects the past events of the 12th century when Prithvi Raj Chauhan was the king of Delhi before he comments on the politics of his contemporary times. To uncover the political incidents the novelist disguises himself as different historical and semi-historical personalities, here as Mussadi Lal, he says:

Their great hero was Prithivi's Raj Chauhan who had defeated Ghori once at Tarain in AD 1191 but the very next year, on the same battlefield, he had been defeated and slain by the same Ghori. They had an answer to that too. 'Prithivi's Raj's only mistake was to spare the life of the *Maleech* when he had first defeated him,' nobody really knows the truth about this Prithvi Raj. A poet fellow named Chand Bardai had made a big song and dance about him. This great hero Prithvi Raj married lots of women and even abducted the daughter of a neighboring raja. But you could not say a word against him to the Hindus. (417)

It was the first instance that India was exposed to the Turkish invasion, and foundation of Islamic rule in a Hindu nation was laid. The politics of the day was affected by the impact of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia, a sufi saint whom the narrator himself follows and Siddi Maula whom he considers a fake Darvesh. After a successful reign of twenty two years Balban's son's death while fighting Mongols proved fatal for the nation. After that in a quick succession, the throne of

Delhi passed to several kings like Alau-Din-Khilji and Qutubudin Aibak and finally to Mubarak Shah. He had a sexual liaison with his courtier Khusro Khan a convert from a Hindu Powar family. Khusro Khan betrayed his master, killed him and took control of Delhi taking the throne. The narrator recollects “There were many claimants to the throne they slew each other; I cannot even recall their names. The Jalaludin Firoze of the tribe Khijlis, an old man with one foot in the grave took his seat on the throne of Delhi. His son could not wait him for die. Many of them came under the influence of false guru called Sidhi Maula.” (425)

Hazrat Nizamudin Aulia – A Different Voice

The dominant Islamic ideology of the different rulers and the resistive nature of the Hindus who could not accept their rulers is quite evident. Mussadi Lal who himself got converted to Islam under the influence of Hazrat Nizamudin Aulia who believe in the love of mankind:

I do not make any distinction between Mussalmans and Hindus as I consider both to be the children of God, the ulema exhorts Your Majesty in the name of Holy Messenger (upon Whom be peace) to destroy temples and slay infidels to gain merit in the eyes of Allah. I interpret the sacred law differently. I believe that the best way to serve the God is through love of his creatures....We Sufis follow this precept and believe that he who has no Sheikh is without religion. (417-18)

The Second Historical Sequence

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Gopal Verma, Ph.D. Scholar

Revisiting the Political History of Delhi in Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel*

The next historical section narrates the plunder of the bloodiest monarch Taimur Lang who brought acute political changes in the 14th century, as the narrator narrate his intentions and Taimur gives justification of what he did. History records that the motive of Taimur was just to plunder the wealth of Delhi but Taimur himself confirms that his motive was to bring infidels to the right path. Instead of a plundered he wants to be seen as a champion of Islam:

We loaded innumerable elephants and camels with the wealth of Delhi and with thousands upon thousands of slaves in our train begun our slow march homewards. We crossed the river Jamna, ransacked Meerut and proceeded along the foothills. We destroyed, as we had undertaken to do, many temples of idolatry. At one place the Brahmins warned us not to touch the images of their god, Krishna, who was said to be so powerful that he could in one night impregnate 1600 women. His image which was made of gold stood as high as ourselves. Under the eyes of the pleading, wailing priests we smashed the idol with our hands and ordered the priests to be beheaded. (461)

The weakness of native king Mahmud Tugluk allowed Taimur to invade and plunder Delhi. Taimur in his justification said that it was Allah who sets him on this task of bringing infidels to the right path and he also asked forgiveness if he had made any mistake or committed any sin, “May Allah forgive us for any sin we may have committed.”(461)

Use of Double Voiced Narration and Satire

The author has used double voiced narration, Satire is evident here while Taimur justifies his actions, the writer satirizes him for his greed and cruelty. The advent of Taimur was responsible for the establishment of Mughal Empire in India during the 15th century which was followed by great inheritance of Mughal kings like Babar and Akbar who ruled for more than four centuries in India. Khushwant Singh deliberately skipped the sequences related to Babar and Akbar because he only focused on those kings whose actions left a negative impact on the politics of Delhi.

The Third Sequence – Aurangzeb, et al. – From all Angles

In the next episode, Aurangzeb the emperor of India, who ruled for almost half a century from 1658 to 1700 is made the narrator of events. We got a glimpse of his character in the previous section where the narrator was an untouchable Sikh who gave his perception of the monarchs.

The author now gives the king a chance to narrate his place in history so that it can be viewed from different perspectives. The author views the political situation and its compulsions from all angles, the common man's as well as the king's. Aurangzeb as a narrator justifies what he did to his father and brothers as a tradition of their family, "Misguided historians have written many falsehoods about the way we came to acquire sovereignty over Hindustan while our father Emperor was still alive. They had maligned our name as a scheming self-seeker and a plotter. They forget that the holy book says: 'God is the best of plotters.' We were but the instruments of His designs." (507-8)

There is a big question posed by a Sikh journalist in the previous episode ‘how different would have been the story of India if instead of Aurangzeb, Dara Shikoh had become the emperor of India!’ This question holds the important view point, would India have developed as a truly liberal secular society and not be plagued by religious intolerance and communal divide even in contemporary times. Aurangzeb thinks only he was eligible to ascend the throne:

Our father Shah Jahan, when he become the emperor of Hindustan in October 1627, once spoke his four sons in the following words ;, Dara Sikhoh has made himself an enemy of good men; Murad has set his heart on drinking ; Shuja has no good trait except contentment . the resolution of and the intelligence of Aurangzeb proves that he can alone shoulder the burden of ruling India. But he is physically weak. (503)

All for the Good of the Empire?

The period when Shahjahan fell ill, the political situation of Delhi became very grim as all the four sons of Shahjahan wanted to become the emperor, Aurangzeb killed his brothers and imprisoned his father and killed thousands of people to become the emperor of India. His behavior was enough to invoke a sense of repulsion and hatred for him which non-Muslims still hold in their hearts till today. But he justifies his actions as being for the good of the empire and the Mughals:

Dara fled before our victorious army leaving the entire country at our feet. With our father too old and too ill to bear the burden of the empire and our brothers

have proved inept we were compelled to overrule our hearts desire to retire to a hermitage and instead forced to take upon us the crown of thorns which adorns the head of kings.... We received felicitation from monarchs of distant lands: Iran, Bokhara, Mecca and Ethiopia. (512)

Persecution of Non-Muslims

The rein of Aurangzeb was marked by bloodshed and persecution of non-Muslims, they were converted forcefully to Islam and those who did not convert had to give *jazia* or were put to the sword “we leveled temples of idolatry to dust and raised mosques on their ruins. We imposed *jazia* on non-believers to induce them to the righteous path.” (515) These brutalities on non-Muslims have left a lasting impression of Aurangzeb as a cruel, intolerant ruler who fretted away the gains made by his forefathers.

Fourth Sequence

The next section is devoted to Nadir Shah, one of the bloodiest monarchs of the world who plundered India ruthlessly. The political era is 18th century and Nadir Shah is the narrator who tries to justify his actions, he claims that the reason for his plunder was that he wanted to expand business with Hindustan but the king of Delhi, Mohammad Shah, did not respond properly, “Mohammad Shah did not reply to our letters.” (526) He scolds Delhites severely for their double-faceted personality, serves them with worst abuses on the earth and calls them infidels. He condemned everything about Delhi – its mannerism, fruits and climates and has

praise only for two persons, sharp-tongued Hakeem Alavi Khan whom he admired for his straight forwardness and saucy Noor Bai who was his mistress:

The people of Delhi are both ungrateful and cowardly. Instead of thanking us for the trouble we had taken by coming hundreds of miles over mountains, through ravines and desert waste to save them from the infidels, they had the audacity to insinuate that it was not the love of Islam but the love of gold that has brought us to their country. (537)

The subjective format of the narration brings history and its political impact to life. It is not a dust dreary reconstruction of a pedant but a very human rendering of a despot, who does not mince words in describing his actions, “Most of the inhabitants—being Muslims—knew that we had come to save the country from the infidel Marathas and were friendly towards us... If our men were found taking anything by force we had their heads chopped off; if they molested Indian women we had then castigated and gave their month’s wage and their testicles to their victims.”(528) he further elaborated his character:

Those who remonstrated before us, we had then flogged in front of their kinsmen...their women stripped naked. Many, unable to face themselves after the chastisement they had received, ended their miserable existence with their own hands. Gold and silver and precious stones flowed into our treasury as the waters of Oxus flows into the sea.” (541)

Meer Taqi Meer, another historical figure and a great poet of seventeenth century is in charge of the narration in the next part titled Meer Taqi Meer. The narration incorporates the personal fortunes of the poet with the political rise and downfall of Delhi. He reveals the duplicity and hypocrisy of the begum of Rias Sahib and his own sexual misadventures with her, his guilt and apprehensions. He held Ghulam Qadir, another blood thirsty Mughal emperor, responsible for the sorry situation of Delhi. He says:

The news from Delhi brings tears to everyone's eyes. Neither Nadir Shah nor Abdali, neither the Marathas, nor the Jats, nor the Sikhs caused so much havoc as is reported to have been caused by the ill-gotten Ghulam Qadir, the grandson of Najibuddaulah, and his ruffianly gangs of Rohillas. This villain insulted and deposed Shah Alam II before putting out his eyes. May Allah burn his carcass in the fires of *gehunnum*! Only Allah knows how long murder and looting will go on in Delhi! They will have to revive to find victims and bring back some loot to be able to loot again. Delhi is said to have become like a living skeleton. (584)

The Marathas attacked Delhi; Ghulam Qadir fled and was captured, Maratha Warriors had his body beheaded and mutilated before putting him to death. Mir Taqi Meer was a sensitive human being who also blamed himself for the devastation of Delhi, "I had two loves in my life, Begum Qamarunnissa and Delhi. One destroyed me, other was destroyed by me." The kings who plundered and killed innocent people tried to justify their wrong doings but the poet who is not directly involved believes his secret affair with Begum Sahiba which indirectly led to Delhi's downfall. very important analysis of this chapter is the character of Begum Sahiba, the wife of

Nawab Sahib and his chief Patron, led to Delhi's downfall as the Begum did not allow the Nawab to stay in Delhi and protect his kingdom as it would interfere in extramarital activities. For her personal gratification she allowed Delhi to burn. Mir Taqi Meer thinks he too is responsible for the Begum's sin:

But very Begum Sahiba was a designing, masterful women who had her way in everything. In old Nawab Rais she had the husband she wanted; with the signing rhymester who passed for a poet, she had the part time lover she wanted. Her taste for poetry was determined by the applause a poet received and not its real worth. Since Meer Taqi's star was in the ascendant, she was determined to be his pattern and his mistress. She found Taqi a wife he could ignore. (556)

Fifth Sequence: Mutiny

The next sequence is named 1857 there are three simultaneous narratives, one of Alice Adwell, second by Delhi's emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar who was just a puppet in the hands of the British Emperors, and a Sikh army man Nihal Singh, who fought on the side of the British in the mutiny. The three narratives are masterfully interwoven, none of the narratives interrupts the other yet are also interconnected. Alice Adwell who is Indo-British in origin and converts to Islam and becomes Ayesha Bano Begum for the safety of her children takes a stance against Muslim rulers of India and narrates their callousness and insensitivity. She presents her narration with such conviction that the reader starts hating the Muslim rulers. She is not spared even after conversion to Islam, and is dishonoured by Mirza Abdullah and his friends. She is quite disillusioned with Indian and her heartrending narration of the brutal rape by the natives and the

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Gopal Verma, Ph.D. Scholar

Revisiting the Political History of Delhi in Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel*

emperor's carnage of innocent British citizens turns the tables on history which only sees the English as oppressors, she wants to expose Indians who could be more brutal to the innocent people, "I narrate what happened to me so that the world knows how rotten, villainous, treacherous, degraded and lecherous these Indians are. The Entire nation deserves to be put against wall and their carcasses thrown to pye-dogs!" (608)

Bahadur Shah Zafar narrates the story of an already ruined city. Bahadur Shah, born in 1775 is better known as Bahadur Shah Zafar, was the son of Akbar Shah from his Hindu wife Lalbai. He, after the death of his father, was placed on the throne in 1837 when he was little over 60 years of age. He was last in the lineage of Mughal emperors who ruled over India for about 300 years. Bahadur Shah Zafar, unlike his predecessors, was a weak ruler who came to throne when the British domination over India was strengthening and the Mughal rule was nearing its end. The British had curtailed the power and privileges of the Mughal rulers to such an extent that by the time of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the Mughal rule was confined only to the Red Fort. Bahadur Shah Zafar was obliged to live on British pension, while the reins of real power lay in the hands of the East India Company. He was the one who led the first war of Independence which India lost owing to the disloyalty of Basant Ali Khan, a eunuch. The emperor was betrayed by the disloyalty of own people not by the foreign rulers and had to accept exile.

Khushwant Singh hails the king who was pronounced by the historians as cowardly as a patriotic Indian who lost everything in the pursuit of India's victory. His stance against *firangis* was due to their wrong policies, "of putting up cow and pig fats in the cartridges and refutation

of giving any credit to his future generations of the age-old legacy of his forefathers.” He stood against British till the end even though he knew it was a losing battle:

The men who had taken over the reins of government were like novices on unbroken horses. They knew how to squander but not how to earn. They could not be bothered with accounts and let the treasury become empty. There were so many who wanted to fight the jihad. But no one bothered to train them. They were sent into battle armed with pick-axes, spears and knives against trained men armed with muskets. Five days after Id-ul-Fitr there was an engagement across the river at Ghaziabad. Victory went to the *firangi*; martyrdom to our Ghazis on the Grand Trunk Road. (624)

Another important political development which occurred at that time was the unity of Hindus and Muslims. Though they were opposed to each other, they got united against the common enemy, the British Forces. Only Sikhs were the exception.

Later in the afternoon some forty Europeans men and women, their hand tied with ropes, were brought in our presence. A huge mob followed; the guards had difficulty in keeping back. “Dohai, dohai” they screamed. They’ve killed our men, we want justice. (612)

The revolt of Delhiwalas against the British rule brought a significant change in their relationship. Henceforth the British followed a policy of divide and rule to prevent the nation from uniting against them.

The third narrator Nihal Singh presents another perspective. Being a Sikh and with the intention of taking revenge for the death of great Guru of Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh ji and his four sons, supports and helps British in defeating Bahadur Shah Zafar. The narratives of Alice Aldwell, Bahadur Shah Zafar and Nihal Singh provide a panorama of the time by synthesizing the viewpoints of the emperor and the commoner, ruler and ruled. Nihal Singh, an Indian supported the British Empire, because of their antipathy to the Muslims. It was not only Nihal Singh but the whole Sikh community who supported them:

All my life I had been hearing of Dilli. When I was a child Mai told me of Aurangzeb, King of Dilli, who had cut off the head of our Guru. She called him Auranga and spat whenever she used his name. I also learnt to thoo on Auranga's name. When I was older Bapu told me of the exploits of our ancestors who looted Dilli and Brought back saddles full of gold and silver. And of Sardar Baghel Singh who built a Gurudwara on the very spot where our Guru had been martyred. (624-25)

Partition of Bengal and Other Episodes

Khushwant Singh then details the significant political events which changed the fortunes of India. The Partition of Bengal was the one incident which brought Hindus and Muslims closer and reversed the expectations of the British to divide them. The event was quite crucial as far as Indian independence was concerned. It challenged the British rule by paving the way for the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims to unite and fight for their cause. People opposed the policy of

‘Divide and rule’ envisaged by English and came together for one cause and one nation. Nationalism which till date was an alien concept was awakened in the heart of all Indians.

The partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon in 1905 had angered Hindus who felt that it was designed to further divide Hindus and Muslims and create Muslim state in East Bengal. Young Bengali Hindus and Maharashtrian and some misguided Sikhs viewed to undo partition and destroy British rule. In Bengal bombs were thrown at English officers and some were murdered. In Gujarat an attempt was made on the life of Lord Minto who had succeeded as Curzon as viceroy.... They said if all Indians were to stand alongside and urinate in a tank there would be enough urine to drown the English population in India. (669)

Corpses on which Delhi was Built

Thus lending his voice to an unknown narrator in the next section ‘The builders’, Khushwant Singh gives the details of the corpses and burials over which Delhi had been built and which has made this city so grand and big. The probable voice in this chapter is of Sir Sobha Singh (the father of Khushwant Singh). Though the human race and geography of any country or state must have been changed several times but Delhi has risen and fallen more than any other state and its fortune had fluctuated more than any other city. Singh describes:

I had never seen a city as grand as Delhi. At the time it looked bigger and grander because more than five thousand maharajas were encamped there with their

retinues. Also thousands of common people from distant provinces had come to see their majesties. (666)

Gandhian Era

The focus in this episode is on Gandhi as a non-violent leader who got Hindus and Muslims together and the destiny of India again began to change under his charismatic leadership: A new leader appeared on the scene, Gandhi. He even got Muslims to join Hindus in anti-governmental agitations....Gandhi demanded that since the war was over, the government must give up powers it had assumed for the prosecution of war.” (680) He further says that he, “Saw Hindus and Muslims drinking water from the same water booths, marching through the bazaars arm in arm chanting *Hindu-Muslim Bhai-Bhai*—Hindus and Muslims are brothers.”(680)

General Dyer’s massacre in Amritsar also was responsible for the birth of extremist factions constituting all the communities in India, e.g., Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, which definitely had its impact on Indian nation, the rise of Sardar Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Rajguru symbolized a new and vibrant breed of young Indians who would not accept a foreign yoke:

In Amritsar General Dyer fired on an illegal assembly at Jaliawala bagh killing over three hundred people and wounding over a thousand the province was placed under martial law. Mischief makers were flogged in the public, their property were confiscated and their leader exiled. As from his throne amanullah, before he caught invasion, he was toppled from his throne. The years 1919 and 1920 were

certainly bad years for India. But they were beginning of the realization of my dreams. (681)

In the twentieth century the political situation in India changed completely, most of the kings had vanished and the British had completely taken hold of the Indian subcontinent. Unlike the political rebellions in preceding centuries the fight for independence took its fierce turns. The man who shook the British Empire was a puny frail man called Gandhi. His political importance is obvious as he emerged as most influential leader of the century. The British felt completely uprooted from India as the country was overcome by the spirit of Swaraj:

‘Have you no pride in being an Indian?’. ‘Have you no sense of shame praising alien rulers who exploited and humiliated us for over a hundred years? Have you forgotten what they did to your forefathers after the First War of Independence of 1857? Have you in your generosity forgiven them the massacre of innocent at Jallianwala Bagh in 1919? And the hangings, tortures and imprisonment of thousands upon thousands of freedom fighters?’ (691)

Birth Bangs of Freedom

The freedom of India brought smiles to million faces but it also brought tears and agonies to millions of others, as partition of the country led to violence and bloodshed. Some people were feeling happy after getting the news of Indian freedom but there were many who could judge the impending cataclysm and the inability of the Indian leaders to tackle the problems of the post-independent. Singh sarcastically calls the leaders ‘*hijdas*’;

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Gopal Verma, Ph.D. Scholar

Revisiting the Political History of Delhi in Khushwant Singh’s *Delhi: A Novel*

‘When Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were leaving Ayodhya for their fourteen year exile, the citizens came to see them off. At the city gate Ramchandraji begged them to return to their homes: “ladies and gentlemen, thus far but no further.” The citizens obeyed his order and went back. Fourteen year later when the exiles returned to Ayodhya they met the party sitting outside the city gates. “You did not give us permission to return our homes,” they said. “You only allowed men and women to go back. We are neither because we are hijdas.” Sri Ramchandraji was so overcome by their devotion that he blessed them: “In the year 1947 I grant you hijdas the empire of Hindustan.”’ (722)

Assassination of Indira Gandhi

The violence in Delhi was triggered by the assassination of Indira Gandhi on 31 October 1984 by two of her Sikh bodyguards in response to her actions authorizing the military operation. After the assassination of Indira Gandhi on 31 October 1984, by two of her Sikh bodyguards, riots erupted on 1st November 1984, and continued in some areas for days, killing some 800 Sikhs. Sultanpuri, Mangolpuri, Trilokpuri, and other Trans-Yamuna areas of Delhi were the worst affected. Mobs belonging to Congress (I) carried iron rods, knives, clubs, and combustible material, including kerosene. The mobs swarmed into Sikh neighbourhoods, arbitrarily killing any Sikh men, women or children they could find. Their shops and houses were ransacked and burned. In other incidents, armed mobs stopped buses and trains, in and around Delhi, pulling out Sikh passengers to be lynched or doused with kerosene and burnt.

The mob is composed of about fifty young boys armed with iron rods. Some have canisters of petrol in their hands. They surrounded the gurdwara and storm in. they drag out the Bhai and beat him up with their fists and rods. He cries at the top of his voice: '*Bachao! Bachao!* They shout back : *Bhindranwale key bacchey* (son of Bhindranwale)! Ask your father to save you now.' They bring out the Granth, its canopy, carpets and durries, heap them up in a pile and sprinkle petrol on it. One puts a match to it and the heap burst into flame...He shrinks and crumples into his a flaming corpse. They yell triumphantly: '*Indira Gandhi amar rahey* (Indira Gandhi immortal).' (733)

Such wide-scale violence could not take place without government and police support. Delhi Police, whose paramount duty was to maintain law and order situation and protect innocent lives, gave full help to rioters who were in fact Congress Workers or else mercenaries hired by the Congress party who were working under the able guidance of sycophant leaders. It is a known fact that many jails, sub-jails and lock-ups were opened for three days and prisoners, for the most part hardened criminals, were provided full provisions, means and instruction to "teach the Sikhs a lesson." But it will be wrong to say that Delhi Police did nothing, for it took quick action against Sikhs who tried to defend themselves, the Sikhs who opened fire to save their lives and property had to spend months dragging heels in courts after-wards while their rioters and their mentors roamed free.

Delhi – Grandeur and Squalor

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Gopal Verma, Ph.D. Scholar

Revisiting the Political History of Delhi in Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel*

Delhi is a story that spans both the grandeur and squalor of a city that has been at the receiving end at the hands of those who ruled her, a city that was plundered, defiled but rose again like the phoenix from its ashes, a city which has always been at the centre of Indian politics. Delhi is a paradox, a city of culture and calamity, of conceit and capability, of poets and pests, of politicians and saints. *Delhi: A Novel* is not a dirge sung over the lost empires, 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 the face of a nation's collective debasement.

What makes the novel an enduring work of art, and lifts it above the deep despair that pervades the whole narrative is the testimony that it provides to a haunting sense of loss. The novel could be hailed as Singh's significant contribution to Indian English fiction for its erudite content and insightful recreation. *Delhi* not only comments on the present day politics but the author has travelled through centuries and picked up characters of his choice to narrate their own stories and political compulsions in an unbiased manner. Unlike a professional historian who presents dry facts only, he weaves the real historical figures and the fictional common characters in a multitude narrative that shows the political impact on contemporary Indian society of the past 600 years of Delhi's history.

Even though the narrator wants to get away from Delhi, "I am beginning to tire to Bhagmati as I am of Delhi" (664) but Delhi casts a spell which is not easy to break. There is a saying 'once a Dilliwalla always a Dilliwalla.' Singh confesses, "I no longer want to buy myself an air ticket to get abroad to get away from Bhagmati and Delhi. I told you – once you are in

their clutches there is no escape?” (664) Nadir Shah brings the characteristic of a Dehliwala in much lucid words, “We have heard that the people of Delhi loved their city as bees love flowers. But we could not believe that the child of a courtesan would prefer to live in a Delhi brothel rather than our palace in Iran!” (535).

The novel ends on a prophetic note the narrator sees the legacy of Delhi’s turbulent past continuing in contemporary India. We have obviously not learnt from our past mistakes:

‘...What we saw in the summer and autumn of 1947 when we slew each other like goats unveiled our real nature. You will see much worse in the years to come. Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists will go on killing each other in great numbers. Your Gandhi and his *ahimsa* are as dead as....as dead as....Whatever the dead bird is called.’(693)

References

- Howe, Irving. *Politics and the Novel*. Publisher: New York: Horizon Press. 1957. Print.
- Singh, Anita. “Inscription of the Repressed: Khushwant Singh’s *Delhi*.” Ed.
- R.K.Dhawan. *Khushwant Singh: The Man and the Writer*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2001. Print.
- Singh, Khushwant, comp. *The Collected Novels*. Omnious ed. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1999. Print.
- Language in India www.languageinindia.com
12 : 10 October 2012
Gopal Verma, Ph.D. Scholar
Revisiting the Political History of Delhi in Khushwant Singh’s *Delhi: A Novel*

Sppeare. Morris Edmund. *The Political Novel: Its Development in England and in America*. New York: Oxford University, 1924. Print

=====

Gopal Verma
Doctoral Scholar
Department of English
University of Jammu
Jammu and Kashmir
India
gopalverma37@gmail.com

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

12 : 10 October 2012

Gopal Verma, Ph.D. Scholar

Revisiting the Political History of Delhi in Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel*

180