

A STUDY ON SOCIO-HISTORICAL ENTITIES IN KHUSHWANT
SINGH'S *DELHI*

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Khushwant Singh, the prominent writer of the 20th century, has been the most influential personality in the literary world. He has a wide understanding on social problems and his writings depict brilliance and passion towards the problems that torment the Indian spirit in contemporary age. Besides, being a writer, Singh also proves himself to be a historian in describing and depicting the antiquities of his nation. He concerns much more for social, political, religious and communal harmony in India, especially the capital city Delhi. Humanism is vanished its essence remarks Singh often. His versatile writings outline the painstaking issues. His passage is not without tribulations. It is an endless pursuit for identity and recognition which is exhibited through the means of his literary profession.

He accepts the fact that his mind is deeply rooted. His creative urge as a novelist, short story writer, historian and essayist has been the exact achievements of self expression and a continuous search for self seeking. Singh admits that he has consumed more than two decades (nearly twenty five years) to complete the novel, *Delhi*, and it becomes apparent that his versatility is justified with his tireless efforts he has taken so far.

In his foreword to the novel, Khushwant Singh states: "All I wanted to do was tell my readers what I learnt about the city....my aim was to get them know Delhi and love it as much as I do." He also adds "History provided me with skeletons, and I covered it with flesh and injected blood and a lot of seminal fluid in it." Singh enables the history of Delhi '**represent**' for itself. He throws light on the reality of life-the cyclic factor of birth, growth and death.

Delhi, as Singh says, is a place of power forever. It has been the platform of historical activities and has been under rule by Kings, Emperors, Queens, Maharajas, Sultans, and even the western colonies like the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese, and others. However, it remains the possession of power as its permanent place. Delhi is also an eternal capital city of India. Singh takes enormous zeal to depict the history of the city, Delhi blending with episodes in the novel. He also has interest in an astonishing blending of history, romance, and sex of the time. He enlightens some of the important periods and episodes starting with reigns of the rulers of

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. He narrates the chapters like Aurangzeb, Nadir Shah and Meer Taqi Meer in the concerned persons' voice. The story travels on two parallel levels- the narrator Bhagmati episodes are connected with the present and in one sweep, from the beginning to end, Singh exhibits six-centuries of the history of Delhi.

"Delhi" moves backwards and forwards in time through the description of the history of the city, Delhi. It has in its background the story of a journalist fallen on awful period (possibly an autobiographical representation) and his relationship with a hijra (eunuch) named Bhagmati who seems to be a perennial source for love, lust, passion and many more things to the journalist. The immeasurable lust and impudent master piece on the city of Delhi begins with the narrator, knowingly Khushwant Singh himself, returning from England after as he acknowledges "I had my fill of whoring in foreign lands" (Delhi-1) a thirsty and hungry, aging human who loves the city, Delhi, as much as he loves the ugly but vigorous hermaphrodite prostitute Bhagmati, whom he factually picks up from a uninhabited road on a hot Delhi summer noon.

The novel is set with twenty one chapters and nine among them represent historical events. Singh refers to many categories of people who have either participated or witnessed the major historical commotion. Singh uses the monologue form for nearly seven of the chapters to illuminate the history in a realistic approach. Though Delhi appears to be noisy and unclean to the strangers, it in fact provides a comfort zone to the passionate lovers of the city. The writer becomes the typical example for his unbroken relationship with Delhi. For him, Delhi is an epitome of love, lust, hunger, satisfaction, thirst and many more things. "It is only to their lovers, among whom I count myself, that they reveal their true selves." (1)

The factual details provided by Singh become the great representation of the histories to enable the readers inherit awareness on the historic past in the real sense. The blindly built stories among people get shattered with the hidden truths of horror and pity. Singh has not simply written about the humiliating aspect of his own community. There has been maturity in his understanding. His characters have attitude of both as types and as individuals. They are bordered by their surroundings, civilizations and traditions. Singh builds powerful characters with full of strength and flesh and blood as well as weak characters without flesh and blood to enable them appear like comic strips. His writings have the art and artifice about the challenging and disturbed time in our history and apply the real microscopic view of touches to various ills of our societal life pattern.

Having no place to go after carrying out her imprisoned life in the dreadful Tihar jail, Bhagmati pleads him to take her to his dwelling place. The kind and compassionate sardar accepts and thus develops a relationship of ups and downs in his life. Bhagmati, neither male nor female but possessing enormous sexual appeal, makes his life forcible amidst the magnificent remnants of Delhi in its zenith, and even saves the narrator's life from the fervent and furious mobs of the anti-Sikh riots. The novel mainly, records the major historical events that have bestowed Delhi with a celebrated past, a mystic and an atmosphere in the records of history over a period of 600 years. From the Muslim invasion in the year 1625, the establishment of the sovereignty of Sultan Ghiasuddin Balban, to the assassination of Indira Gandhi, followed by the massacre of the Sikhs.

The novelist, though fond of building sexual overtone throughout the novel, is in fact very keen and particular also in presenting the historical past of the nation with reference to its capital city, Delhi. Whenever possible, Singh skillfully handles the concepts of both sex and

nationality to imbibe the spirit of balanced attitude. Singh is firm with his views on national spirit and he very openly mentions about it to Lady J.H.T. when he accompanies her during her visits. He concerns for the magnificent past of Delhi and adds that the glory has been snatched away especially by the invaders of foreign lands. Singh sharply writes “These foreign bastards with diplomatic privileges have shot all our game. If I had my way, I would shoot the bloody lot.” (18) He is daring enough in exhibiting his views on the face. But at the same time Singh also highlights the involvement of graceful people in strengthening and energizing the life of Delhi.

While Delhi, as Singh says, has been raped repeatedly, Bhagmati, on the other hand, derives pleasure with or without money. But she becomes more overwhelmed when she is with Singh and considers him as an epitome of sexual sterility and potency. The belief of Bhagmati is justified with the innumerable affairs of Singh. Even Lady J.H.T. becomes fond of him. She insists that “Not all rich; I had some made at my own expense. And not of all nations. India is missing. Perhaps I’ll add an Indian this time,…” (20) Throughout the novel Singh grieves for Delhi that the culture has gone and the remnants of historical sketches are being smothered in the name of art and expansion. The central character of Singh’s novel is the city, Delhi, itself. He converts it into an organic whole by according the time past and time present of the historical, ‘time-bound’ Delhi an instantaneous presence.

Singh attempts to maintain balance between two prominent characters, the city, Delhi and Bhagmati. Both have been acclaiming reputation for their inner charm and magic. In fact, sometimes Bhagmati becomes more vital than Delhi with the due importance entrusted on her. In the words of the novelist, “she came to be sought by the old and young, the potent and impotent, by homosexuals, sadists and masochists.” (30) The novelist intends to state that both Delhi and Bhagmati have been under exploitation. Bhagmati stands as a symbol of exploitations like Delhi at the hands of several rulers. She is not only exclusively a satisfying companion for the novelist but also a bridge between several ages of past and present Delhi. She symbolizes Singh’s emotional and sentimental relationships with Delhi. She represents the present destruction of Delhi. The novelist chooses the events and characters for description according to his own calculation and the scope of the stimulation provided to him by the invasions and possessions. O.P.Mathur writes the opinion of Michel Zeraffa to tell how history and society blend together in the novel. Michel Zeraffa writes that with the novel, society enters into history and history enters into society. The words can be applied to ‘Delhi’.

Delhi is invaded for its enormous wealth and ultimately on its charming historical and distinct values. The life in Delhi is presented through her environment, history, monuments and moreover Bhagmati. As Herbert Marder says, ‘She represents what Virginia Woolf calls “the unity of being” (26). Besides, Singh remarks sarcastically through Bhagmati who criticizes her life of misery and pain. She acknowledges well about her life status and when the narrator refers to religion and spirituality she reveals her anguish on the blind superstitions. She aspires that “In my next birth I will be born as Indira Gandhi and become a famous daughter of India.” (49) Singh takes his readers into many whimsical flights of journey. He turns towards history behind the creation of different forts, and well-known names to enable the readers to comprehend well the manners and intention of these rocks and ghosts of long gone days.

The narrator also exhibits change of Gods, change of language and culture, and change in new flavors of life. He refers arts and crafts to project appearance and disappearance of the

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constant changes taking place during the journey travelled through the history. The happiness and misery of Delhi in the novel brings out the real nature of the people of Delhi. The pleasure and pain of Delhi also brings out the real character of Delhi people. Singh also deals with caste prejudice in one of the chapters. The miserable life pattern of the sweepers and cobblers is exposed well. Their life and death does not have much attention in the society. As one of the characters aptly highlights, “They are all the same to us. One goes, another comes, *zulum* goes on.” (123)

Singh’s attitude to Indian English, and to translate ideas without much care to the sense often brightens the seriousness. Possibly, he does this to present his Indianism. He possesses immense potential and skill as a creative writer of interest and authority. V.A. Shahane argues this point as:

I think he occupies a special position in his adherence to, and interpretation of, Realism. His creative faculty is preoccupied, not so much with individual as an isolated entity or with society in the mass, as with the main issue of maintaining the balance between them. The far sighted realist must try to keep balance between the claims of sociological presentation and the virtues of psychological analysis. Singh’s realism, thus becomes is part of moral universe. (74)

In the novel, the narrator also laments over the loss of grandeur of olden days of Delhi. He shows his liking for the renowned culture and tradition of Delhi and well-built trust in centuries aged values and ethics of Delhi from her materialistic and non-materialistic culture. Besides, crisis on leadership over Delhi since ages have been illustrated by Singh. He elaborates how the foundations were laid to build a city according to the wishes of the unfamiliar superiors. It is evident that their unfamiliar superiors of far off land had disinterestedness in the welfare of the residents and in constructing a city based on her history. They simply wanted to possess and preserve their secreted motives for executing absolute power and control over the socio-cultural life of Delhi. It also becomes clear that the colonial authorities wanted to picture urban appearance to their imperial designs. “Lutyens prepared a plan of the layout of the new city and where he meant to locate the viceregal palace and the Secretariats. (325-326)

Singh throws light on the past glories with much agony. Corruption prevailed in the then period is portrayed evidently. Almost all the officials naturally bribed in accordance to their capability either in the form of money or things. Singh explains that “This is not *baksheesh*, he explained to me later, but sound investment.” (321) Laborers too have been brought from Rajputana where monsoon failed to provide the basic provision to them. Singh also recollects the vast empire of Delhi in his younger days when he visited for work along with his father. He is filled with wonder about its magnificence. He comments “I had never seen a city as grand as Delhi. At the time it looked bigger and grander because more than five hundred rajas and maharajas were encamped there with their retinues.” (317)

Sexual overtone, regarded as one of the constant usages in Singh’s works, is boldly brought out in the novel with the character Bhagmati. Singh begins the novel with the coming of the narrator of the story at Delhi a city whom the narrator calls his beloved, his first romance and sex with his much more adorable Bhagmati after staying abroad for a long time and having in quite a few sexual encounters with foreign whores over there. The sexually distorted nature of Singh is also projected through the narrator of the novel when he craves to seduce a sixteen year old foreign girl Georgine to have sex. “Girls are more easy to seduce when they are sixteen than

when they are a year or two older. At sixteen they are unsure of themselves and grateful for any reassurance you can give them about their looks or brains...” (114) The novel resembles common attitude of people who devote themselves towards love and lust. The narrator justifies his view by representing himself to fit into the role.

Singh’s deep love for Delhi enables him to write about her history. He begins with the times of Nizamuddin Aliya and the narrator continues with the rulers of thirteenth and fourteenth century and then describes the invasion of Timur, the reigns of Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, the invasion of Nadir Shah and its aftereffects. Next, he moves on to the revolt of 1857, some happenings of modern Indian partition of Bengal, the changing of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi. His description of the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi, the activities of terrorist revolutionaries, the round table conference the prominent events leading to the communal riots, the assassination of mahatma Gandhi, and the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 are absolutely creative.

The choice of history is purely superficial and personal. The chosen history, events and characters are the message for the future and the lesson of the past. The novel is an output of his knowledge, wide travel experience, meeting people of different nations with mixed habits, behaviors and manners. He attempts to group the inner born feelings and fundamental strengths and weaknesses of the rulers, who design the fate of Delhi and India at large. He employs a special technique in narration, the monologue and the narration between the past and the present. The whole novel revolves around Bhagmati with mostly the past and the present of Delhi.

Musaddi Lal, an imaginary character, brings out the traditional past of the Indian society. He belongs neither to the Hindus nor the Mussalmans. He celebrates the festivals of both the religions alike. Singh defines a unique picture of Musaddi Lal in the light of secularism. He says,
I realized that I belonged neither to the Hindus nor to the Mussalmans...I was disowned by the Hindus and shunned by my own wife. I was exploited by the Muslims who disdained my company. Indeed I was like a *hijda* who was neither one thing nor another but could be misused by everyone. (55)

When Balban receives the news that saint Nizamuddin is treating Hindus and Muslims alike, he is replied with the philosophy of multi-religious Indian society.

The characters like Timur and Nadir reveal their true intention for invading India and mounting to the throne of Delhi. Their episodes horrify killings of Hindus in millions by the alien kings and plundering Delhi for all its gold. When Alludin comes to power he despoils the Hindu kingdoms of the South. Invariably, all invaders on India use religion as an excuse to do so. Correspondingly, Timur justifies his invasion by elaborating that it is a holy mission enjoys upon him by Allah. It rightly puts forward that behind the façade of holy wars, there raises the question of personal motives, ambitions, and interests who assume superiority forever. Nadir is completely of lust for power and wealth. Meer’s observations refer to the dissociating Delhi, his own traumatized heart as the woman he loves in Agra has become insincere to him and has taken a picture for a new lover and the misfortune for him is that he still loves her. S.K.Dubey says about love of Meer, “Meer makes some telling remarks on love. Love is an affliction which spares no one, neither the old nor the young, neither married nor single.”(68)

The chapter on 1857 refers to a particular history of India in which three non-historical persons, reveal a rational scene of the time. The Sepoy Mutiny is suppressed and the year marks “the first of Indian Independence”. During the period, all categories of the society suffer. 1857 is the longest chapter that runs with alternative voices of Alice Aldwell, Bahadur Shah Zafar, and

Nihal Singh. Their narratives provide a panorama of the time by building of the great entities with non-entities. The novelist, later, gives his personal voice on men and women related with blue star operation and anti-Sikh riots. It depicts the history of modern times. The Congress movement and its impact left over the country is also highlighted. Gandhi is seen as rebel for restoring peace among the people. “A new leader appeared on the scene, Gandhi. He even got Muslims to join Hindus in anti-government agitations.” (332) Controversial issues on Gandhi and other political leaders are marked. Singh is of the opinion that Gandhi, imbibed with dual roles, has diverted the minds of people.

Through the fictional character Ram Rakha, violence of killing Muslims for vengeance is illustrated. Since his sister gets abducted and raped, he becomes actively engaged in a mission and partition issues too speak a lot while Hindus are plundered. Manipulation by leaders like Gandhi and Nehru are criticized by the militant Hindu organisation R.S.S. Gandhi remains branded as double fraud for his partial views on the society. The R.S.S. motivates the young boys to indulge in terrorist actions against Muslims. “We Hindus only know how to give our lives, not to take the lives of others! It must change. Are you prepared to lead an attack on the Muslims of Delhi? Remember what they have done to your sister!” (359). All these cause a deep division between the two communities. This breakdown of mutual relationship between the two main religions of India extends to the breakdown of relationship between the Sikhs and the Hindus.

Conclusion

The novel ends with the assassination of Indira Gandhi by one of her Sikh bodyguards. Riots between the Sikhs and the Hindus continue in the city. Bhagmati as usual is with the narrator and urges him to move towards the safe zone. Singh is unwilling and is hurt by conscience to safeguard him. But, violence continues more severely everywhere in the city. Bhagmati alarms Singh. “They are killing every Sikh they see on the road, burning their taxis, trucks, scooters. Connaught Place is on fire. They are looting every Sikh shop, office, and hotel. And you are sitting here waiting for them to come and kill you! Hain? I am going to take you to Lal Kuan. Nobody will bend a hair on a *hijda*'s head. Chalo, she orders.” (387). It indicates the fact that communalism has come to India and the movement becomes a witness to this tragic truth of violence and riots. This has happened due to the breakdown of mutual relationship among the people who no longer regard themselves as Indians. Rather, they try to identify and establish themselves based on their caste, community, religion, sect and even sub-sect. Thus, Singh makes to highlight the message of compassion and communal harmony among the mass of diversified backgrounds.

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