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THE NOVEL DELHI-AN EPITOME OF MULTICULTURE

¹Geeta Bisht Walia

¹Associate Professor

¹J.D.V.M.P.G.COLLEGE,KANPUR

ABSTRACT

The present research paper aims to display the quality of Khushwant Singh as a historian. In his novel *Delhi*, he discusses the various cultures of India. India is a multilingual and multicultural nation. The paper depicts the various cultures of India. Delhi being the capital is the centre of multi culture and Khushwant Singh in his novel *Delhi* portrays this distinctive feature of Delhi. In his novel the writer discusses the age from 11th century to 21st century. The novel through the various ages shows the multi-culture of India. The readers travel with the writer from the period of Balban to the age of 1984. The novel ends with the Hindu Sikhs riots in Delhi.

KEY WORDS Culture, Religion, multi- culture, Hinduism, Islam

RESEARCH PAPER

Our country, India is a multicultural nation. People following various religions reside in India peacefully. Our country is home to many religions like Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. There is no nation in the world, which has habitants who follow various religions. This is the uniqueness of our country.

Delhi is the capital of India. Being the capital, Delhi bore the brunt of many foreign attacks. When the foreigners came, they spread their religion in India. Khushwant Singh in his novel *Delhi* has beautifully depicted the multi culture of India, the Mughal attacks and their effect on Hindu culture.

The term culture comes from the Latin word *cultura* with its root meaning 'to cultivate', generally refers to patterns of human activity and the symbolic structures that give such activity significance. Culture has been called 'the way of life for an entire society'. It includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, norms of behaviour and system of belief. More recently the United Nation Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2002) described culture as follows: "...culture should be regarded as the set of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional

features of society or social group and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyle, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

Culture is not only a mode of living but it also gives a feeling of selfhood; an identity in the society. So when one culture tries to destroy the other the problem of identity crisis arises. India is a multicultural nation. Multiculturalism is a word that means a society where various ethnic groups live together without sacrificing their own identity.

Khushwant Singh is one of the most prolific writers of Indian English Literature. He tried his hands in different fields of literature like fiction, non-fiction and short stories. He has written six novels-*Train to Pakistan*(1956),*I Shall not hear the Nightingale*(1959),*Delhi*(1990),*The company of Women*(1999),*Burial at Sea*(2004) and *The Sunset Club*(2010)

Delhi is the third novel of Khushwant Singh which was published in 1990. Khushwant Singh was born in Hadali (Pakistan) but due to partition; he had to come to India. Most of his time was spent in Delhi. He loved Delhi and his love is portrayed through his novel *Delhi*. He had also edited a book *City Improbable: Writing on Delhi*, which is a collection of essays written by different writers on Delhi.

The writer took twenty five years to complete the novel. This novel is a proof of his historical knowledge. The novel is like a travelogue that takes his readers to different centuries. The reader travels from eleventh century to twentieth century. Khushwant Singh in *Delhi* has depicted the era from Balban to the period of 1984. The title of the novel is significant as the whole story revolves round the capital, Delhi.

In the novel *Delhi*, the protagonist is a Sikh journalist, who due to his foreign contacts also works as a tourist guide and thus earns extra money. This job not only helps the journalist financially but it also gives him an opportunity to visit the historical places of Delhi. The journalist had an affair with a hijra, named Bhagmati. Through Bhagmati the writer depicts the status of Delhi. Bhagmati, is a *hijra*, who is exploited by both males and females. Delhi, too is exploited by many invaders and by its own rulers.

We have twenty-one chapters in the novel and out of which ten chapters give the readers knowledge of the foreign invaders, the social status of Hindus during the Muslim regime, 1857, the first war of freedom, the making of Delhi, status of refugees, assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and Smt. Indira Gandhi.

The narrator was in love with Bhagmati but was ashamed to take her to public places. He used to take her to secluded places. Once he found a stone in Mehrauli, in which there was swastika on top, two lotus flowers on it in Arabic. Beneath it was written Mussadi Lal, son of Chagan Lal, Kayastha. Through the monologues of Mussadi Lal we come to know the situation of Hindus during the Muslim rule. Mussadi Lal adopted Muslim ways to save himself from exploitation. But this created unhappiness in his married life. His wife, Ram Dulari hated him and did not let him touch her. Mussadi was married at the age of seven. When he became thirteen, he went to his in-laws's house to take his wife back but his wife's parents denied sending her with a *Malech*. After the interference of Kotwal sahib, Ram Dulari came to his house. She felt as if she was punished. Mussadi says:

“But she cried all the time. And if I as much
as put my arm on her shoulder to comfort her
she shrank away from me. One night when I
went to her bed she started to scream.”¹

She cooked her food separately. But after visiting Ghiaspur and meeting Khawaja, her attitude changed towards Mussadi and they started their married life. Apart from the monologues of Mussadi, we have monologues of Muslim invaders. Through their monologues we come to know the mental attitude of Muslims towards Hindus.

The invaders not only looted our wealth and captured our land but they also destroyed the Hindu temples. Timur, the invader attacked India after having a dream. His aim was to propagate Islam in the extensive regions of India. Nadir Shah was the invader who attacked Delhi and killed people like animals.

“With the spear of Islam we had pierced the heart of the land of
infidels and sent thousands of idolaters to hell; we had served
Allah and His Prophet.”²

When Nadir Shah attacked Delhi, Delhi was ruled by the Mughals but Nadir Shah called it the land of Hindus. Mughals settled in India but they felt their roots in Islamic countries. This is the reason despite a secular nation the Muslims do not feel one with the Hindus. Religion plays an important part in the political life of Delhi. It has let the rulers exploit people and perpetuate violence, with theologians misinterpreting religious ethics to effect hatred and separation. Amitabh Bagchi says:

“We are answerable for having let our religious identities drive
us to killing each other. Khushwant Singh has shown us some of
our handiwork in Delhi.”³

The narrator also worked for Doordarshan. One day he received a letter from a lady named Kamla, wife of an army officer. She wanted to write a book and so requested the narrator to help her in that work. The narrator told her the story of Aurangzeb who was known as a *Zinda Peer* in history. He never used the royal money for himself. He earned his livelihood by sewing the caps and making copies of Quran. In the novel chapter ten is devoted to Aurangzeb, a cruel man who used religion as a weapon to fight against the Hindus. He hated Hindus and destroyed their temples.

“We leveled temples of idolatry to dust and raised mosques on
Their ruins....Our Mussalmans subjects were happy with our
Ordinances and acclaimed us a Zinda Peer. We waged a ceaseless

war against the infidels.”⁴

Khushwant Singh in his novel discusses the life of the famous Urdu poet, Meer Taqi. Meer Taqi in his teenage fell in love with the Begum of Nawab Rais and composed poems for her. The Begum after becoming unattached to Meer, sent him to Delhi. He gained popularity in Delhi but his happy days came to an end with the attack of Nadir Shah.

Khushwant Singh being a social novelist always tried to attract the attention of his readers towards the social evils of India. Casteism is one of the major social evils of our society. The novelist has dedicated the eighth chapter, **The Untouchables** to this evil. The narrator of the chapter talks about the untouchables of Rikabganj. In our society we have a hierarchical caste system. We have four major classes in this system and the untouchables are given the last class. They are thought to be impure due to their menial jobs. Today the caste system is not so strict but it still prevails in our society. In the novel, *Delhi* Khushwant Singh talks about the status of untouchables during the Mughal period. Many untouchables adopted Sikhism due to their exploitation by the high caste people. The narrator of the chapter says:

“Most of us untouchables of Rikabganj had attached ourselves to the lotus feet of the Guru and begun to call ourselves the Sikhs of Nanak”.⁵

Rangreta after adopting Sikhism, received a new look. With his beard and turban he looked different from other untouchables. Thus; he received a new identity and was happy with it. It depicts the social evil of our society that low-caste people have no identity. The Sikh Guru Tegh Bahadur was captured and killed in the reign of Aurangzeb. The judge Qazi Abdul Wahab ordered that the body of Guru will be exposed in front of the public. At this Rangreta, with the help of Lakhi Rai, a rich and upper caste fellow decided to save the dead body of Guru. They gave Guru a respectable funeral and Rangreta got an opportunity to take the sacred head of Guru to Anandpur.

“At last the Guru performed the great miracle. He had given a carrier of shit and stinking carcasses the privilege of carrying his sacred head in his arms. Hereafter anyone who called me unclean would have his mouth stuffed with dung. I was Jaita Rangreta the true son of Guru.”⁶

The conclusion of the chapter gives the untouchable, Rangreta his true identity for which he had been searching for long.

Khushwant Singh in *Delhi* shows the growing power of Sikhs. Sikhs fought against Afghans and emerged as a powerful community in India during the reign of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. In the chapter **Meer Taqi Meer**, he calls the Sikh community a fierce community that grows long beard and hair. The Sikhs hated Muslims as they were

responsible for the death of their Guru Tegh Bahadur. The British were clever people and utilized the hatred of Sikhs towards Muslims. They used them against Muslims. The Sikhs helped British in 1857 to take revenge from the Muslims. In the chapter **Nihal Singh**, Nihal was tempted to join the Jan Company because the company was against the Muslims. By joining the Jan Company he was serving his community.

“The other fellow then told me that the Mussalmans had risen
against Jan Company and put back Mughal on the throne of
Delhi. This Mughal was the grandson of the same Auranga who
had murdered our Guru.”⁷

When India got freedom, the Sikhs felt a danger to their identity. They felt as minority in a Hindu dominated nation so under the leadership of Jarnail Singh Bhinderwala, they launched a dharma yudh for a separate state (Khalistan). To remove the militants from Golden temple, Amritsar Smt. Indira Gandhi ordered the army to attack the temple and named the move as operation Blue Star. The Sikhs were angry and hurt at this move of Smt. Indira Gandhi. The guards Smt. Indira Gandhi killed her in a fit of anger. This created Hindu-Sikh riots in 1984. The situation of Delhi became worst as it has a big Sikh population. Bhagmati, the narrator's beloved comes to the narrator and tells him the real situation of Delhi.

“They are killing every Sikh they see on the road, burning their
taxis, trucks, scooters. Cannaught Place is on fire. They are looting
every Sikh shop, office, hotel. And you are sitting here waiting for
them to come and kill you! Hain? I am going to Lal Kuan.
Nobody will bend a hair on a hijra's head”⁸.

The above paragraph depicts the horrible situation of Delhi. Bhagmati suggested him to cut his long hair to conceal his identity as a Sikh. At this the narrator became angry. This shows the sense of belongingness towards one's religion in which a true Sikh follows the five symbols of Khalsa-Kaccha, Kangha, Kripan, Kara and Kesh. As the narrator and Bhagmati were going out they saw that mob sprinkled petrol over the Granth Sahib and lit a matchstick and burnt it. And at last they burnt the Bhai of Gurudwara alive. The narrator came back to his flat. When he was in his flat he heard Budh Singh abusing Hindus for burning the Granth Sahib. The Hindu boys in revenge killed him. The Sikhs belongs to India but during the riots of 1984 they felt as refugees in their own motherland. This feeling is beautifully presented by Khushwant Singh in this novel.

The Hindus and The Muslims joined their hands together to fight against the British but after Jinnah's two nation theory; the age old rivalry between them began. This culminated into partition and millions of people do not only lose

their land and property but their lives too. Hindus and Sikhs blamed Muslims for their woes and vice-versa. The post-partition period can be understood through the chapter '**The Dispossessed**' in which we come across the monologues of Ram Lakha, a victim of partition. Ram Lakha was born in Hadali (Pakistan). They were rich merchant but during partition, his sister Lachmi was abducted by Turrabaz Khan, who forcibly married her and converted her into Muslim. Ram Lakha's family migrated to India to save their lives. They lost their land, property and daughter in Pakistan and were forced to live in poverty. Ram Lakha hated Muslims because they were responsible for their misery. Ram Lakha found a job in R.S.S office of cleaning furnitures. The R.S.S was against the Muslim stay in India.

“What right had the Mussalmans to be in Delhi or anywhere else in

India when they driven us Hindus and Sikhs out of their Pakistan.?9”

Ram Lakha was given a number 840. He killed a Muslim shopkeeper. After that he got a new position in the Sangh. The chief was happy with him and suggested him to attend the meetings of Mahatma Gandhi. Once, when he was attending the meeting, a man killed Mahatma on 30th January, 1948. He felt himself responsible for the death.

At last we can say that the novel *Delhi* possesses all the variant shades of various cultures. We see how people of different religions fought for their existence and identity. In the conclusion we can say that Khushwant Singh has been successful in portraying the diversity of India in the novel *Delhi*.

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