Uncovering Sedimentary Pasts in Khushwant Singh’s Delhi

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Abstract

Khushwant Singh’s Delhi: A Novel narrates the history of Delhi over several centuries, and in doing so overlaps the genres of fiction, history book and memoir. There are two sets of narration: one based in the present named after the hijra, Bhagmati; and the second named after historical personages. The alternating and shifting narrative voices uncover a spatiotemporal account of the city. The spatial stories are unfolded at the intersection of invaders and lovers of the city, biography and poetry, monumental spaces and everyday events, tales of emperors and subalterns, and through creative mixing of history and anecdotes. Through tales of horror and pathos surrounding violence over the centuries, the article argues for acceptance of dichotomous and binary characteristics in the city.

Keywords: Delhi, narrative voices, spatiotemporal, dichotomous, identities

Khushwant Singh’s magnum opus Delhi: A Novel, written over twenty-five years narrates the history of Delhi over several centuries and in the process unfolds a spatiotemporal account of the city. Covering events roughly from the seventh to twentieth century, through multiple narrators including prominent historical personages and not so well-known figures, Singh presents Delhi as a palimpsest where rulers and invaders over the years have inscribed their power. The paper analyses the novel’s narratology, explores the relationship of the various narrator-characters with the city and argues for acceptance of contradictory and dichotomous characteristics in the city and its people.
While the title declares it to be a novel, *Delhi: A Novel* overlaps the genre of fiction, history book and memoir. There are two circles of narration, one is set in the past and the other in the present; chapters in the present titled “Bhagmati” (Singh’s mistress) alternate with those of the past named after historical personages. The narrative voice constantly shifts between the first-person narrator, Singh and major/minor figures from the past, an inter-weaving of narration of history from above and below, unfolded across the spaces of the city. In a brief author’s note at the beginning of the novel, Singh mentions that while history provided him the skeleton, he covered it with flesh and injected blood into it.

The love for the city is reiterated through the epigraph from the nineteenth century poet Ghalib: “I asked my soul: What is Delhi?/ She replied: The world is the body and Delhi its life”. The couplet is both an insight into the author’s mind and guides the reader’s gaze in looking at the city as a beloved, the life-force of the materiality of the outer world. The idea of the city as (female) body that is captured and violated by the (male) rulers is also explored later in this article.

The narrators of Delhi’s past include power-wielding figures like Taimur Lane and Nadir Shah, and the dispossessed like Jaita Rangeeta. The narrative voices can be categorized into those of violent invaders and those professing love for the city. The narrator Singh and Bhagmati, as lovers of Delhi can be placed in lineage of other lovers of the city across centuries: Musaddi Lal (fourteenth century); Hakeem Alvi and Meer Taqi Meer from the eighteenth century; and Bahadur Shah Zafar and Ghalib from the nineteenth century. Interestingly all these lovers are situated at in-between positions, be it that of religion or gender, blurring the straight and monolithic categories of identity. Bagchi in “The Ghosts of Khushwant Singh’s *Delhi*” argues:

> The author also flirts with the possibilities that lie beyond the binary. So, there is Musaddi Lal, neither Hindu nor Muslim, who seeks refuge in Nizamuddin, and, of course, there is the backbone of the entire book, Bhagmati the hijra, who is neither man nor woman, or, looked at another way, is freed from being either by being a bit of both. (2014, para. 24)

Born a Hindu, and taught in a madrasa to get a professional foothold as a scribe, Musaddi Lal, narrator from the fourteenth century, compares himself to a hijra since his religious allegiance lies neither with Hindus nor Muslims, he attempts embracing both faiths or even rejecting them by following the Sufi teachings of Nizamuddin.
Musaddi Lal’s love for Delhi finds echoes in Meer Taqi Meer four centuries later, who having lived in Agra, Delhi and Lucknow, claims Delhi to be his favourite. His heart weeps for the city destroyed by Nadir Shah, “It hath been ruined and laid desolate / To that city I belong, Delhi is its name” (Singh, 1990, p. 231). In the glorious city of the Mughals, the following words were etched on the walls of Diwan-i-Khas at the Red Fort: “Gar Firdaus bar roo-e-zaminast; Hameenasto, hameenasto, hameenasto - If on earth there be a place of bliss, it is this, it is this, it is this” (p. 261). Bahadur Shah Zafar, Mughal emperor, poet, connoisseur and patron of arts symbolized a societal and aristocratic order that died after 1857. The beloved city of Zafar, Zauq and Ghalib lay deserted and ruined by the brutal action of the British.

Singh declares that as a writer he put in the novel all he had: love, hate, vendetta and violence. The myriad emotions are part of the creative process and also representative of the narrative voices. On flipping the coin from lovers of Delhi to its invaders, one comes across chilling tales from Taimur Lane to Nadir Shah to the British who attempted to colonize the city politically and culturally. Taimur Lane raided Delhi towards the end of the fourteenth century, slaying people, taking them as slaves and destroying temples and wrote: “We were informed that after our departure there was no one to bury the dead...the towns of Delhi were deserted save for crows, kites and vultures by day and owls, jackals and hyenas by night” (p. 101). And then comes the cruel replay in Nadir Shah’s account; Chandni Chowk was mercilessly looted, amassing enough treasures that no taxes needed to be levied on Iranians for three years. He even takes away the famed Kohinoor but could not command love from Hakeem Alvi and Noor Bai, “We realized that we could take her body with us, but her heart would remain behind in Delhi. And what is a woman’s body worth if her heart not be in it!” (p. 192). Nadir Shah finds it hard to believe that Noor Bai chooses to live in a brothel in Delhi rather than in his palace in Iran. The British, a century later in 1857 destroyed the city yet again: “All that was left were empty houses and corpses. And dogs, cats and rats to eat them” (p. 301). The paradisal city described on the walls of the Red Fort lay a desolate place, its culture massacred along with its people. Violence and desolation are repeated patterns in Delhi’s power historiography, repeated invasions destroyed not only the material life but the social-cultural fabric of the city, and the contemporary city is built on these ruins. Hossain argues that “Delhi...
acts as a palimpsest or rather a kind of parchment on which successive generations have written and rewritten the process of history-- a kind of parchment where successive invaders have inscribed and re-inscribed their activities” (2020, para. 2).

Delhi’s broken history lends itself to the clichéd symbol of the phoenix that rises again with resilience after destruction. The “invaders” of the city have also been rulers who over time brought new languages, cultures, cuisines, and architectural styles leading to an amalgamation that makes it difficult to define Delhi culture. The blending adds to the richness of composite culture and language, but there is the counter argument that it leads to dilution of a quintessential Delhi culture, if there ever was any. With broken histories and series of migrations to the city, be it for purposes of administration, education or work opportunities, a large number of inhabitants of Delhi do not profess love for the city. This is in stark contrast to the strong emotions that Kolkata and Mumbai invoke among its peoples. Dupont et al., analyse “The Alchemy of an Unloved City” where with the “exception of a few chasers of djinns, of the writer, Khushwant Singh, some descendants of long-established Delhi families and a smattering of others...hardly anyone is ready to declare a passion for Delhi” (2000, p. 16). Delhi, as seat and site of political power has witnessed construction and destruction of various cities including Siri, Tughlaqabad, Daulatabad and Jahanpanah, and the upheavals have disrupted the relationship between places and people.

Two major periods of city construction are detailed in the book, the building of Shahjahanbad and New Delhi, through the narratives of Jaita Rangeeta and Sobha Singh respectively. Jaita Rangeeta describes the city, “Dilli began to change. Every day a new building! Every day the city wall rising higher! Every day new minarets and domes rising into the sky!” (Singh, 1990, p. 126). Shahjahanabad, with Chandni Chowk and the imposing Red Fort on the banks of the Yamuna was a testimony to the magnificence of the Mughal architecture, literature and culture flourished in the Mughal period, and art connoisseurs were not limited to the court but there was appreciation of poetry in the streets as well, both the king and the beggar could recite couplets of the poets of the age like Zauq and Ghalib. Varma writes,

The culture of Delhi had acquired a certain authenticity. Over a period of time, varying elements had synthesized to produce a composite
lifestyle for its inhabitants—not laboured, not grafted—but effortlessly woven into the city’s own personality. Its socio-cultural ethos, distinctive enough to give even the witticisms of the city an unmistakable Delhi flavour, was what prompted Zauq to say: “Kaun jaye par ab Dilli ki galiyan chod kar” (“Who then can leave the streets of Delhi”). (1989, p. 41)

However, the destruction of Delhi by the British forces in 1857 and the subsequent shifting of the capital to Calcutta broke the spirit of the city and it lost its privileged position as a political power and literary centre. Construction began at a frantic pace again in the city when the British announced shifting of the capital back to Delhi in 1911. Consolidating power over and through space is the driving force behind rulers erecting forts, palaces and cities, and yet ironically according to a popular saying whoever built a new city in Delhi did not rule it for long. Within two decades of the inauguration of New Delhi in 1931 as the imperial city, the British were forced to leave the city and country. Singh’s father and grandfather were among the major contractors of New Delhi, Sobha Singh was the builder of South Block and War Memorial Arch (India Gate) apart from numerous other buildings including Regal cinema hall, was popularly referred to as “owner of half of the new city” (Singh, 1990, p. 343). The narrator Singh is a thinly veiled reference to the author, Khushwant Singh, as his father had been one of the builder-contractors of the city, he is an “inheritor” of its built heritage, has witnessed it rising from dust. Khushwant Singh in “My Father, the Builder” describes the new city taking shape, “in what had been a wilderness, a metropolis was beginning to rise” (Singh, 2010, p. 8). He writes that while the names of Lutyens, Baker, Teja Singh and Shobha Singh are etched in alcoves at Raisina Hill as architects, engineers and builders of New Delhi, the roads have been named and renamed after politicians in the city, underlining the temporality of fame through built structures.

Empires may crumble, seats of power may be destroyed and forts may lie in desolation, but the city lives on with new rulers and commoners who seek to forge relationships across the broken histories and its remains. The monuments, both intact and those in ruins, play a significant role in connecting the pieces of history across city spaces, the past is forever etched in the present and underlines the city’s skyline and memory. Benjamin in “A Berlin Chronicle” discusses the relationship of memory to space, for him it operates between the landmarks of the official city
and the footfalls of the solitary subject. The past is not recollected or recorded in abstraction, but it is put together through the creative process of memory. Buildings and monuments carry not just official significance, but carry associative meanings, people and places are remembered in terms of who accompanied one on these visits. Singh discusses the monuments of Delhi, with reference to the history behind them and in terms of visits to them while serving as a “guide” to others. Benjamin writes that one “who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging” (Benjamin, 1986, p. 26), and the narrator of Delhi does that. The text mixes history with personal experiences; uses poetry from different centuries to substantiate the historical narrative; alternates voices of emperors like Aurangzeb with that of low caste Jaita Rangeeta; and adopts narrators with in-between positions of identity to unravel Delhi.

The repeated attacks on the city, the violation of its people and uprooting of its linguistic-culture heritage evokes myriad emotions of nostalgia, pain and love for a lost past. On one hand are the rulers, who have asserted control and power over the capital, and on the other hand are migrants to the city. Delhi has been termed “city of migrants” and in the post-independence history, from partition till date, the city has been a witness to influx of migrants for various reasons, but it is questionable if after years of stay in the capital people consider it home and love the place. The narrator and his friends discuss the issue of migration, and talk about the partition refugees who struggled to rehabilitate themselves in a new city while battling emotional and material losses. Singh feels that the city has changed beyond recognition, and complains that the Punjabi refugees are responsible for it. His friend retorts that Punjabis migrated out of compulsion but contemporary Delhi is the “nation’s orphanage” (Singh, 1990, p. 380) with thousands pouring into the city every day, be it for educational purposes or for job prospects. The discussion about millions dispossessed of land, fortune and homes due to communal violence in 1947, reminds one of 1984 where religious animosity and hatred left the city burning and homes destroyed, not by an invasion from outside but from the “enemy” inside. According to Bagchi,

This, then, is the crux of the book, the argument that has been developed over a few hundred pages and several hundred years: We are answerable, each one of us, for having let our religious identities drive us to killing each other, for never having trusted one another. (2014, para. 19)
The connecting thread of historical narratives in the novel is violence, right from Taimur Lane in the fourteenth century to Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination in 1948, ending with the anti-Sikh riots in 1984. The book closes with 1984, but we cannot forget the events after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 or more recently in 2020. It is important to remember this past of violence, to remind oneself that neither cities nor people have singular identities, be it of religion, language or culture. For a city to evoke love and trust in its inhabitants, it is important to embrace differences and diversities. Singh conflates his love for Delhi and Bhagmati, the latter symbolic of blurred and multiple identities.

Singh equates his passion for the city with that for hijras; hijras are variously defined as eunuchs, hermaphrodites, transgender or third gender defying the monolith categorization of gender and sexual orientation. Singh writes about the hijra, Bhagmati:

Delhi and Bhagmati have a lot in common. Having been long misused by rough people they have learnt to conceal their seductive charms under a mask of repulsive ugliness. It is only to their lovers, among whom I count myself, that they reveal their true selves. (Singh, 1990, p. 2)

The city desires a sense of acceptance, of belongingness, of being treated like a home, a place of attachment, and not merely as a place of opportunities. The narrator admits that he detests living in the city and yet can’t keep away from it for long, “the strange paradox of my lifelong, love-hate affair with the city and the woman” (Singh, 1990, p. 3). Bhagmati evokes a similarly mixed response by being lusty in bed but speaking eloquently like a queen. Delhi, like Bhagmati, may not enamour on first appearance, but is still courted by all. Singh reiterates the similarity and juxtaposition, “As I have said before, I have two passions in my life; my city Delhi and Bhagmati. They have two things in common: they are lots of fun. And they are sterile” (p. 30). The multifarious personality that appropriates and encompasses supposedly contradictory impulses is common to Bhagmati and Delhi.

The narrator wishes to unravel the mysteries of both the city and the hijra, to explore the riddles of Bhagmati’s bodyscape and Delhi’s cityscape. The narrator wonders what a hijra would look like without clothes, to extend the analogy to the city, what would it look like stripped of its imposing architecture? What is the city’s real self and who can unravel it? The narrator describes his three acts of sex with Bhagmati as the
purgatory, the seeking, and the final one of destruction of the individual self (fanā) and the merging of two into one. The narratology explores the corporeality of women and the city. Singh has sexual encounters with various women that he takes as a guide to monuments but these are relationships that are not sustained or nurtured over time; it could be compared to fleeting encounters of invaders with Delhi, a city they raided but did not have a deep engagement with. Some of the historical accounts like Nadir Shah’s has haunting images of atrocities committed on the body of the city.

Singh juxtaposes his love for Bhagmati and Delhi, and admits that he cannot stay away from their seductive charms, “I told you - once you are in their clutches there is no escape” (Singh, 1990, p. 315). Neither Singh nor Bhagmati can tear themselves away from the hypnotic love of Delhi. Bhagmati feels that she will die here and says, “If only I could tear myself away from the lanes and bazaars of Delhi” (p. 380). It is an interesting triangular relationship where the lovers, Singh and Bhagmati share a common beloved, the city of Delhi. Through Singh’s family lineage, avid interest in history, exploration of lanes, romancing of the city in different seasons, serving as a guide to historical monuments and weaving in anecdotes of everyday life with biographies/autobiographies of kings and poets, the city is unfolded for the reader. Marlewicz argues:

The reader is drawn into the novel’s spatiotemporal dimension, observing the events through the eyes of the narrator and understanding them as the narrator does. By so entering into - or merging - the narrator’s consciousness, the reader becomes a participating presence: both a doer and witness to what happens. (2016, p. 168)

The two sets of narrative voices pull the reader into the spatial stories of the city that are unravelled at the intersection of monumental spaces and humble abodes, through overlapping of tales of emperors and subalterns, and by creative mixing of history and anecdotes.

Singh’s text thus blurs the generic boundaries, debunks popular perception of historical figures like Aurangzeb, and in locating multiple narrators at in-between positions, be it that of religion or gender questions monolithic categories of identity. Marlewicz suggests that “The identity of the hijra challenges the simplified, dichotomous and normative views on sexuality, socially acceptable forms of relationships, religious affiliation and morality” (2016, pp. 171-72). These contradictory ideas are
reflected in the nature of the city as well. Wirth discusses the formation of cities historically and stresses that the city has “been the melting-pot of races, people and customs, and a most favourable breeding ground of new biological and cultural hybrids” (Wirth, 1995, p. 66). Despite the horror and pathos surrounding violence in the novel, it suggests a possibility for future in a direction which is non-moralistic, accepting, and weaves the voice of the other in the self for creative possibilities of identities.

References


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