CHAPTER IV

DELHI: A GLOSS ON HISTORY

‘Delhi’ is the famous historical novel written by the famous Indian writer Khushwant Singh. This novel has, much like ‘The Satanic Verses’, had the unfortunate distinction of receiving a great deal of public notice. But the attention that has been focused upon it has not relevance to the book at all, with the result that the genuine strength of one of the major works of fiction published in the eighties has not been adequately appreciated. Behind the narrator’s endless adventures with American Missi Babas, German stenographers, British dowagers, and lonely army wives; behind a long and complex interaction with a hermaphrodite that Singh dwells upon with an interaction attention to detail behind, briefly, the quintessential dirty joke that Delhi: A Novel is expected to embody-lines a point of view which illuminates some of the larger issues of life and living. Singh told a journalist soon after the publication of Delhi:

Gone is the culture of Delhi... it breaks my heart. I no longer want to see Hauz Khas or go to Suraj Kund, which was good four mile, walk or visit Tughlakabad that was almost another city. Today they are in the middle of slums with construction all around. I came here when here when there was no New Delhi. I saw the whole city
being built. At that time was no New Delhi. I saw the whole city being built. At that time all these ruins were accessible to us. You could see them for miles. There were no roads an walked to them. Now they are smothered in the name of development, art or what have you... Delhi has not produced anything that will last.

Apart from Ghalib.

Singh tells us that he was inspired to write Delhi by Ivo Andric’s ‘The Bridge on the Drina’ (1945). The Yugoslav Nobel Laureate’s celebrated trilogy (‘Bosnian Chronicle’ and ‘The Women from Sarajevo’ are the other two novels), which was written during World War II, presents a tableau of Bosnian history from 1916 to World War II. One of the two major contemporary Yugoslav authors, Andric in his work combines the twin traditions of realism and modernism. Born in Dolac in 1892 (he died in 1975), the Serbo-Croatian author was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1961. While his early reputation was established with Ex Ponto (1918), a ruminative lyrical prose work written during his internment for nationalist political activities during World War I, his world-wide fame rests on the trilogy referred to above. His novels reveal epic force, and a deterministic philosophy. He has a great sense of compassion. He expresses himself with objectivity and sobriety in a language of “great beauty and purity.”
The Bridge embodies and exploits many of Andric's preoccupations since his early days of writing in the twenties. Here Andric depicts the life of the people of Visegrad through the events of centuries, and the description of countless characters and their reactions, though not necessarily inter-actions, take the place of plot. The Drina is the river, which marks the boundary between Bosnia, Andric's native village, and Serbia. Spanning it at Visegrad, the Turks built a bridge in the sixteenth century, and the novel describes life as it moves around and over the bridge during the course of three and one-half centuries, up to the time of World War I.

As an historical symbol the bridge united Serbia to the east and Bosnia to the West. The bridge also has a superhuman existence. It endures and unites all the inhabitants of Visegrad thought time. In the sixteenth century mothers screamed when their sons were taken to Stambul as a blood tribute to the Vezir, almost four centuries later they shout and plead again when their sons are forcibly recruited for the Austrian army. Viewed in Biblical terms the bridge serve as a Calvary, for in the course of the novel a peasant, a religious pilgrim, a young mill attendant, and a parish priest-all innocent of any real crime are impaled on the Kapia, the wide terraces on either side of the middle of the bridge.

Yet if the bridge claims human sacrifice, it is also the place of spiritual purification. Also, a strand of Moslem thought present in the novel
suggests that the bridge stands for man’s creativity, which achieves something, lasting and good. In this world anything can happen, except that we must cherish wise and great men who build bridges for the love of God and the beauty of the world. The absence of such men who nourish human creativity would mean that God no longer existed.

But through the centuries the bridge appears overshadowed by conflicts rather than harmony. Thus, for Andric, the bridge becomes an idealistic symbol of what could be. Andric’s sympathy for idealism is evident. He values man’s endeavour and finds in his failures tragic waste. Obviously Andric does not share the existentialistic view of human existence.

As in Andric’s The Bridge, or in Ruttmann’s Berlin, Symphony of a City (1927), the protagonist of Singh’s novel is the city itself. What Delhi most certainly is not is a book of history, its scrupulous adherence to the facts of history notwithstanding. Apparently the city lays itself bare chronologically from 1008 AD to the 1984 Massacre. But when one looks back after reading the book, one is not conscious of a sequential narrative but of numerous voices that the city speaks to us through, voices that rise in tumultuous multitude, mingle and become a symphonic concerto: voices of kings and noblemen and their hirelings; rebels and turn coats; lowly Kayasthas, and half-caste anglo-Indians; sepoys Gurus and aulias; perfidious
women and treacherous friends; Khwajasaras, Hindus, Muslims, the untouchables and Christians; whores and hermaphrodites. Singh’s triumph it into an organic whole by according the time past and time present of historical, ‘time-bound’ Delhi a simultaneous presence.

The unmistakable voice of the persona that Delhi does to speak to us is that of the author himself. The vehicle that Singh employs to communicate to his readers is the metaphor of the hermaphrodite:

I return to Delhi as I return to my mistress Bhagmati when I have my fill whoring in foreign lands. 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 that they reveal their true selves...what you have to do for things to appear different is cultivate a sense of belonging. To the stranger Delhi may appear like a gangrenous accretion to noisy bazaars and means looking hovels growing around a few tumbled down forts and mosques along a dead river.

But love can transform ugliness into beauty: “Then the skies over Delhi’s marbled palaces turn an aquamarine blue; its domed mosques and pencil like minarets are spanned by rainbows.” Singh points out that hermaphrodite “stand for a symbol of sterility. It can never conceive and I
thought this was a wonderful symbol for a city in which so much has happened like a sexual intercourse that repeats itself.”

‘Delhi’ is not a ready reckoner for the prurient. Khushwant Singh’s use of the bawdy is deliberate and seriously handled. It is the chief weapon and metaphor through which he expresses his disgust. Bawdiness by definition draws upon the witty and the comic, the absurd and the ingenious, even the gross, and seeks to startle and shock. Wit needs subtlety, and a degree of indirectness; metaphors and allusions rather than four-letter words. Bawdy has in fact been equated with caricature. In Erica Jong’s Fanny (1980) bawdiness is used to create the eighteenth century ethos. More recently Upamanyu Chatterjee employed it to startle and delight as well as to establish the lingering traces of adolescence in the youthful protagonist of English August: An Indian Story (1988). Singh’s use of the bawdy is funny and comic. As often he is gross. He employs it discriminately to condition the reader’s response to his subject matter. Responding to the charge of deliberate obscenity, Singh told a journalist: “I have been deliberately misunderstood by many people who have not bothered to read the book...I have used four letter words. Perhaps the text is racy, bawdy and has a lot of sex. That is me. And that is also a lot of people.”

To the charge leveled against him in a Pakistani newspaper, Jung, that the Singh’s novel makes him a Sikh Salman Rushdie because he has
described Muslim emperors drinking or indulging in an orgy, Singh says: “Nowhere in the novel have I said a word against Islam or the Prophet or the Koran. I have described the lives of Monarchs who happened to be Muslims. It is all taken from their diaries... Why should Islam be linked with the decadence of [a] monarch.” As Anees Jung has remarked, Singh “has not attacked the faith of the man but the man himself who has betrayed that faith.”

In the ultimate authorial judgment the city in Delhi: A Novel emerges as “sterile” and “a dying city.” The Hindus live on “a stale diet of past glory,” are “fawning flatterers,” “ungrateful and cowardly,” their manners “unlikable,” and their ethics “questionable.” The ‘Delhi Walla’ is portrayed, to borrow the words of the master of anger himself, as “the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth.” The anger is Swiftian; the accusatory finger, with its relentless logic, reminds one of Nirad Chaudhuri; and the pain of a harrowing realization is familiar from Saadi, Mir and Ghalib.

The city as a phenomenon has always fascinated the creative eye. While Ruttmanns’ Berlin, ‘Symphony of a City’ (1927) is too depersonalized, and Strand and Sheeler’s Manhatta (sic) (1921) too abstract, Delhi is a human document. Anger veils admiration, disgust, love and gross is sexual nausea suggests the protagonists’, and the author’s, intense
fascination. Singh’s hatred of the object of his desire gives him remarkable insight in the heart and soul of the city and its inhabitants, its past and its present. It is the story of a people who have failed to exploit their potential; a society which has failed to appropriate for itself values that make a people discover and realize themselves: a civilization that has crumbled before attain its true destiny. Traces of the glory that could have been, serve to heighten one’s sense of the magnitude of that failure.

Delhi is not without its faults. The novel is the form through which the present century has expressed its insights into the human predicament. This is the age that has given us North American metafiction, Latin American magic realism, the French New (sic) Novel, concrete prose, and science fiction. Singh’s craftsmanship reveals no awareness of the myriad approaches to literary ontology, or post modernist fiction’s ability to construct, or deconstruct, the world through its strategies of form and language.

Despite its utterly conventional idiom, its failure to create three-dimensional character, fuse thought and action (which makes his earlier novels read like dramatized essays), and the unchanging, often monotonous, tone of the speaking voice that pervades Singh’s entire narrative, it remains a major work. Delhi: A Novel is not a dirge sung over 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 nation’s collective debasement; and above all, the power to ensure that when all is lost an awareness of that loss remains. 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 that loss.

What might have been and what has been Point to one end, which is always present. The past and the present exist, in the same continuum of time, each illuminating the other, and it is difficult to identify the razor-thin line, which separates the past from the present. As a natural corollary, history and politics are inseparable, with a large nebulous zone, which is common to both. The recurring historical patterns, like the mythical ones, as also the similarity between the ‘message’ of the past and the ‘lessons’ of the present point to the fact that one cannot really meditate on history and politics separately; they constantly tend to merge.

Khushwant Singh quotes Ghalib in the epigraph of his novel Delhi: I asked my soul: What is Delhi? She replied: The world is the body and Delhi is life. Singh’s deep love for Delhi makes him work for twenty years, as he says to write a novel on its past, a novel sui generic, a portrayal of historical times, some of the important rulers and some unknown commoners through
their own words, and the whole suffused with the author's personality and views. It is a remarkable tour de force.

Celebrating the past of Delhi, Khushwant Singh has illuminated only some of the significant period and episodes beginning with the reign of Ghiasuddin Balban (13th century). From this he passes on to the reigns of certain other rulers of the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, the invasion of Taimur Lung, the reigns of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb, the invasion of Nadir Shah and its aftermath, the revolt of 1857 and some of the political events of modern India like the partition of Bengal, the shifting of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi, the rise of Mahatma Gandhi, the Khilafat Movement, the activities of the terrorist revolutionaries, the Round Table Conference, the major events leading to the communal riots, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the terrorist activities in the Punjab and the anti-Sikh riots of 1984. The basis on which events and characters have been selected for delineation seems to be only the novelist's personal predilection and the extent of the inspiration provided to him by them. In fact, he has skipped over large and significant areas of the history of Delhi before Balban, all its Hindu rulers a number of Muslim rulers including some of the Moghuls, the gradual rise for the East India Company, the Quit India Movement, the Indian independence and the Partition, the Chinese War and the two Pakistani wars. Among the events of more recent history, while the
Kashmir problem and Emergency have been totally ignored and inordinately long space has been given to the Punjab problem and the anti-Sikh riots. The murderous activities of Bhindrawale and the Sikh terrorists have been dismissed or have been glossed over as those of a “demented monk and his gang of armed goons equating him with Indira Gandhi who did “a stupid thing” in launching Operation Bluestar. The reminds us of Khushwant Singh who returned his Award to the Government after this operation. Along with the most surprising omission of the attainment of independence and Delhi becoming the capital of free Indian and the omission of the Emergency, no modern Indian personality, including Tilak, Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Maulana Azad and Rajendra Prasad, to name only a few, has been considered as important as Nadir Shah, Aurangzeb or Bahadurshah Zafar to deserve a monologue: far from it, they have not even received any worthwhile mention, if at all they have been mentioned. The same applies to selection of commoners also. Musaddi Lal Kayasth, Jaita Rangreta and some other civilians and soldiers representing certain phase of Indian history are all right, but the novelist could not think of any freedom-fighter or democratic leader to allot him a monologue. Such a puzzling selection of events and persons seems to arise only from the author’s whims, which have made his celebration of Delhi so lopsided and unrepresentative. Thus Delhi is, as far as its basic historical material is concerned, at least a series of
haphazard and whimsical forays into the past and contemporary history of Delhi.

But what is more important in the novel is the 'gloss' given to it, the 'flesh' (A note from the Author) with which he covers the 'skeleton' of history. It is this that makes the novel highly enjoyable, significant and an example of the use of a special kind of narrative technique. The narration consists of a few important strategies. The bulk of the material of history consists of the ways of the lives and attitudes of the common people. Out of nine 'historical' chapters seven are largely monologues of ordinary men—Musaddi Lal Kayasth (a government official living in the reigns of Ghiasuddin Balban and his successors), Jaita Rangreta (an untouchable living in the reign of Shah Jahan), Meer Taqi Meer (an untouchable living in the reign of Shah Jahan), Meer Taqi Meer (a poet living in the counts of the late Moghuls), some of the representative characters of the revolt of 1857 (Alice Aldwell, a British lady, Bahadur Shah Zafar who had become almost a commoner by that time, and a Sikh soldier Nihal Singh who, along with the other soldiers of his faith helped the British crush the revolt), and the people who narrate the political events of the early twentieth century in 'The Builders, the plight of the refugees in 'The Dispossesses,' the Operation Bluestar and the assassination of Indira Gandhi. As regards the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 in the last Chapter, the narrator of the novel himself takes on
the task of the historian. Only three chapters are allotted, to historical
personages, often portrayed as ‘villains’ of medieval Indian history, who are
made to appear on the stage and, like Browning’s villains, narrate what they
did and how and why they did it, the last query being the most important.
These three characters are Taimur, Aurangzeb and Nadir Shah. The
novelist is almost at his best in his comprehension of their motives, impulses
and actions and the complete empathy, why, which can also be, for us, their
greatest condemnation. The author has made them condemn themselves out
of their own months. Taimur acknowledges his lust for power.

Aurangzeb his ambition to wade through slaughter to the throne and his
fanatic orthodoxy and desire to spread Islam by the sword, and Nadir Sah is
secret lust for wealth hidden under the grab of religious fanaticism and lust
for wealth the banes of politics in modern India. Their paradoxical
contemporary relevance is heightened by the fact that they speak to us as
through their anachronistic words and phrases the past of India comes alive.
Taimur refers to “India,” 7 a word that is of a later coinage, coinage,
Aurangzeb explicitly refutes the “misguided historians” maligning his name
“as a scheming self-seeker and plotter;” and Nadir Shah talks of rising
earlier on a particular “Sunday.” 9 There are other aspects of the narrative
technique linking the past to the present. The skeletal material of history is
interspersed with the monologues of the narrator, a persona of the author,
sharing with him a rational, humanist approach to men and events (not without a weakness for the 'Sikh psyche') and a delight in draining the cup of life to its dregs. The persona, already transparent in the earlier parts, almost completely breaks down in the later chapters where the narrator describes himself as descendant of those who built the city of New Delhi and where he takes upon himself the task of describing the events clustered around Operation Blue Star and the anti-Sikh riots. True to his 'sexy' humour, he describes the narrator as carrying on an affair with a 'hijda' (a eunuch) given the female name of Bhagmati, to whom he return like a time-traveller, after every foray into history. The interspersed 'autobiographical' chapters are all named after 'her'. Both the narrator and the eunuch provide a modern 'canvas' against which the history of Delhi plays itself out. While the narrator is a mask of the author, the eunuch provide a modern 'canvas' against which the history of Delhi plays itself out. While the narrator is a mask of the author, the eunuch is a multiple symbol of Delhi, of Indian society and history. Both Delhi, and the eunuch according to the author, "have lots of fun" and "they are sterile." 10 The eunuch represents of the Indian society too in some ways, trample upon repeatedly by invaders; but she also may be said to stand for the best in the Indian tradition its universal love and by to stand for the best in the Indian tradition its universal love and by and large its not belonging to any rapidly definable categorization of faith or
orthodoxy. Like Musaddi Lal, the eunch is poised between two faiths, “neither any thing nor another, but...misused by everyone.” 11 She is adjustable and has a resilience that makes her adapt herself to any circumstances. She has love abounding for everybody love as ‘Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.’ Being a eunch, she is an embodiment of contradictions, balances and ambivalences that characterize Indian society and politics its unity and diversity, its patriotism and treachery, its bravery and cowardice, words and deeds, past and present, secularism and communalism, hopes and frustrations, its glorious past and depressing present. The Hindus too are compared to ‘Hijdas’ by Musaddi Lal 12 who poised between the two communities, regards himself also as a ‘hijda.’ Khushwant Singh’s eunch, thus is a character complex in its symbolism and is an interesting embodiment, as we have seen, of certain basic characteristics of Indian society and politics.

The past is often said to cast its shadow on the present, but in this novel it is the present that rebuilds certain fragments of the past in a way as to make them highlight certain attitudes and social and political values, which are of great relevance today. One of the most important characteristics of modernity found in the narrator’s approach to men and events of the past is its rationality. We do not ordinary credit the invaders and tyrants of the Middle Ages with dinarily credit the invaders and tyrants of the middle age
with reason. But in this novel the bloody and horrifying actions of such characters are made rationally plausible because they are viewed from the characters' own perspectives and no man is a villain unto himself. Their actions are also distanced by the rational, ironical attitudes through which they are viewed.

While not ignoring the divisive factors in Indian history, the author has laid emphasis on those, which make India what it is a harmonious blending of diverse elements. Throughout the novel religion, and not religions, God and not Gods, faith and not faiths, are at the root of the value-system. Enshrined in the narrative framework itself are the humanistic narrator and his 'mistress' Bhagmati, the eunuch, who swears by the names of Rama, Allah and Guru simultaneously. Musaddi Lal begins his account of the thirteenth century court and society with the names of "Ishwar who is also Allah, and Rama who is also Rahim." 13 He celebrated all festivals, Hindu and Muslim, alike and names his son 'Kamal', which can also be a Muslim, name if the second vowel sound is elongated. Musaddi Lal says, "If anyone asked me whether we were Hindus or Mussalmans, we would reply we were both." 14 In fact, regardless of the fact whether the ruler was a Hindu or a Muslim, or it was the East India Company, the common men and women are seen as fraternizing with each other. As regards ruler themselves, even a fundamentalist ruler like Aurangzeb is shown as spreading Islam not
out of hatred for the ‘Kafirs’ but out of love for them believing that by converting them he is trying to do what is good for them, “We imposed the jazia tax on non-believers to induce them to tread the righteous path. In everything we did, our only guide was the shariat,” Nadir Shah’s motive force is really avarice and not religion, though he tries to hide his greed under a religious garb:

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 had brought us to their country. 15

He is opposed to both Hindus and Muslims alike and he himself makes no distinction between the two communities when he orders a general massacre. Later in the novel, a Sikh soldier Nihal Singh is greatly affected by the piousness of a Muslim woman whom he has orders to execute:

She goes down on her knees, presses her forehead on the ground a few times. Then she sits back on her heels and holds the palms of her hands in front of her as if she is reading a book. Her face glows. We stop making jokes about her. Her eyes fill with tears, they run down her cheeks and on to her muslin shirt. We stop talking... She
takes out a rosary from her shirt-pocket and tells the beads. By now it is almost dark. She puts the rosary round her neck and stands up. 'Sardar Sahib, I am ready.'

The Sikh soldiers are so much moved by her piety that Nihal Singh touches her feet and allows her to escape. The partition presents glaring examples of Hindu-Sikh amity and occasional cases of Hindu-Muslim friendship also. Khushwant Singh’s anti-extremist views are most effectively expressed in a Hindu fanatic’s narrative of events leading to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. The actual murder shakes his very being and he sheds off his extremism in one violent effort and waits for the Mahatma holding himself directly responsible for the murder:

A fit of madness comes over me. I jump on the man and bring him down. I tear the hair of his scalp; I bash his head on the ground and call him all kinds of names: mother-fucker, dog, bastard, and son of a pig. A Policeman grips me by the neck, pushes me aside and grabs the fellow. There is a lot of confusion. I jostle my way out of the crowd and run away. I start crying running and crying and running. I sit down on the pavement and yell hai, hai. A crowd of people gathers round me. They ask me very kindly: ‘Son, why are you crying?’ I look up at them through my tears and reply: ‘My bapu is dead.’ They make clucking sounds of sympathy. One says, ‘you
must be brave. You must stand by your mother. You must carry on whatever work your bapu was doing.' Then he becomes more serious and asks, 'How did you bapu die? Was he very ill?' 'No, he wasn't ill at all, I killed him with my own hands, I killed him,' Then I slap my forehead and yell, 'Hai, Hai I murdered my bapu.'

This reveals the true self of India. Khwaja Nizamuddin’s message also is an important part of the message of the novel itself:

There is only one God though we call him by different names. There are innumerable ways of approaching him. Let everyone follow the way he thinks best for him. His path may lead to the mosque or to the tabernacle, to a temple full of idols or to a solitary cave in the wilderness. What path you take is not important; what is important is the manner in which you tread it. If you have no love in your heart then the best path will lead you into the maze of deception.

'Delhi’ is a historical novel with a difference, its narrative framework is contemporary, if not wholly autobiographical, it range spans over six centuries; it has not single character or group of characters around whom the events are clustered, the only recurring characters are the author-narrator and his eunch ‘mistress'; even the spirit of the place, in spite of the title, is not too evident, for Delhi is only the footboard on which the events narrated
occur; there is no suggestion of the moment of time either linear or pendulum-like; and the contemporary perspective is more important than the spirit of the age. The novel is almost like a series of video-cassettes of selected episodes from the past prepared by one of our contemporaries, for us and with a narration of events in the narrator’s life also. The work is a weird inquiry into the politics of modern India whose nerve-centre is Delhi. It seems to provide an answer to some of the problems looming large before us-communalism, extremism, regionalism and violence. Its message is of significant contemporary relevance the quality and fraternity of man, Love (with a capital ‘L’ expressed through love with a small ‘l’ which almost sickeningly suffuses the novel), and peace as positive virtue emerging from the repulsive and senseless bloodshed in both medieval and modern times.

Michel Zeraffa writes, “with the novel, society enters history and history enters into society.” 19 the words can be applied to ‘Delhi,’ perhaps in a way not meant by the writer. The novelist has provided to history a contemporaneity, a gloss, both veiling and illuminating, which seems to assume more important than the historical material itself. In these snapshots from history, the filter is not less important than the object. Delhi, in brief, is an assessment and re-interpretation of the past by the present for its own purposes.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3 Loc. cit.

4 Anees Jung, p.7.

5 Loc. cit.

6 “It is a saga of greed, violence, oppression and injustice... there is little to counter the gloom with which the book ends... Yet one cannot help but going back to the transforming and healing power of those who oppose such divisive forces of hated, those holy men from Nizamuddin Aulia to Guru Arjun Singh to Mahatma Gandhi... who are the real badshahs of Delhi,” Makrand Paranjape, “The City is the Hero,” The Times of Indian Sunday Review, 28 January 1990, p. 3.


8 Ibid., p. 151.

9 Ibid., p. 185.

10 Ibid., p. 30.

11 Ibid., p. 55.

12 Ibid., p. 71.
13 Ibid., p. 50.
14 Ibid., p. 62.
15 Ibid., p. 182.
16 Ibid., pp. 286 - 87.
17 Ibid., p. 374.
18 Ibid., p. 67.