Historico-Fictional Association / Disassociation In Khushwant Singh's *Delhi*

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Whether or not one subscribes to the Aristotelian concept of all art as being basically mimetic, one has much less reason to disagree with the old Greek philosopher when dealing with the genre of fiction. A dramatic work is a mimesis of an action involving characters doing things or undergoing experiences as a result of the acts of other characters as well as of their own. What is applicable to drama may also be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to fiction which differs from drama only in the medium and manner of imitation, not in the object.

Historical fiction is today recognized as a specific sub-genre of fiction/ literature. The action of a historical novel or study is fixed within specific spatiotemporal dimensions. For example, see the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott, an excellent practitioner of the sub-genre, so highly praised by Georg Lukacs in *The Historical Novel*.

With the advent of the postmoderns the old spatiotemporal fixities have been boldly subverted and hybridism- -mixing up of genres, styles, periods and place- -has not only been countenanced but canonized. Consider, for example, Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* or even *Midnight's Children*.

Khushwant Singh is an eminent fictionist who though not flamboyant avant-garde like Rushdie is yet innovative in his own right. He is virtually wedded to an essentially innovative outlook. Khushwant Singh, too, is no less innovative in his historical novel *Delhi*. The underlying principle of organization in this novel is locational, rather than specifically temporal. In a manner of speaking, the city of Delhi is the titular hero of the novel. It is fixed in space but the time-scheme of the book is extremely flexible and loose, freely ranging over disparate periods between the hazy, indeterminate founding of the Indian metropolis to the recently prevailing modern periods. Delhi itself is the virtual hero of the novel which unifies its temporally loose organization. Khushwant Singh does not by any means lay a claim to the postmodern virtuosity of the ilk of Salman Rushdie, whom he admires with all his heart, yet he has given us a very readable, interesting and accomplished combination of fact and fiction in his book which lays bare the plethora of conflicts and conciliations in the very heart of India from the hoary past to the very recent times. a quick look at the recent theoretical status regarding history-fiction interface would help.

Right from the days of Plato and Aristotle philosophers have tried to differentiate between history and literature (Greek: *poesis* or poetry. In ancient Greece poetry included drama, and so "poetry" was equivalent to all literature, being an inclusive term indicating all creative works). While Plato indicted poetry as a falsification of reality, Aristotle termed it as more philosophical than reality (=history). Contingency and arbitrariness bedevil life and its account, namely history. But chains of events as presented in poetry are governed by the laws of necessity or probability, making poetry more philosophical than history. The poet, being at bottom a philosopher, does not believe in the dictum *post hoc; ergo propter hoc*: that is, because something has happened later than something else, therefore it is a properly philosophical consequence of the former. In poetry as well as philosophy, the entire emphasis is on *consequence* rather than mere *sequence*. Events in historical narratives are structured sequentially, while those in poetry (epic and drama) are structured consequentially.

Aristotle's defence of poetry against Plato's outright indictment of it as untruth leading to mental and emotional debilitation of its addicts is a celebrated *locus classicus* in the history of literary criticism. Inherent in this plea for imaginative literature is the question as to how far and in what way a poet may depart from the bare facts of history in the interest of artistic integrity and audience appeal. This question is particularly vital for historical novelists and other writers as well whose narratives include visible elements (like personages and incidents) from the well-known annals of history. All novelists, nay all realistic narrators of all kinds, are historical in the sense that every chain of events has an explicit or implicit spatiotemporal scheme. Even in novels, such a Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* where time and location are fluid and dependent on the stream of consciousness, the time-place configuration, though shifting every now and then, is traceable though not entirely firm or insistently obtrusive. One may say that even in recent times with the advent of avant-garde modernism and postmodernism the literature-history nexus has more or less continued to survive—because no narrative discourse can be ahistorical altogether. This is particularly true of the tradition of the Indian novel, both in English and in indigenous languages. T.N. Dhar in *History-Fiction Interface in Indian English Novel* has very competently discussed the issue in the light of postmodern critical theory with particular reference to the works of Anand, Nayantara Sahgal, Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and O.V. Vijayan. According to Dhar the history-fiction nexus, in the Indo-English novel in particular, very strong owes not only to the tradition of the novel in English but also to India's colonial past. Dhar avers:

> . . .the novel in India came into its own under the impact of the novel in the West, particularly of Britain. In fact, the novel's engagement with history was at the very root of its development. To present a truthful picture of life in their novels, the novelists located human actions in a recognizable geographical and historical space and a comprehensible time-frame. This paved the way for a more serious and purposeful engagement of the novelist with history in the nineteenth century. It was this novel which had a major influence on the novelists in India, first on the

> ones who wrote in regional languages and, later, on the ones who wrote in English.

Delhi (1990) has received immediate appreciation from the public. Thus the 25-year long endeavour of Khushwant Singh to put together a story spanning several centuries of Delhi's history has been truly rewarded. Here is Khushwant Singh's Foreward to the paperback Edition of *Delhi*:

> I cannot yet believe that the first hardcover edition of my book sold out before a copy was available in the book-stores. Or that a second and a third edition should have to be printed within a fortnight of the first. It is enough to turn the head of any writer. It was mine.

Such candid "confession" could be expected of none other than Khushwant Singh. And such a whopping success is no mean achievement indeed. We read further:

> It took me twenty-five years to piece together this story spanning several centuries of history. I put in it all I had in me as a writer: love, lust, sex, hate, vendetta and violence-and above all, tears. I did not write this novel with any audience in mind. All I wanted to do was tell my readers what I learnt about the city roaming among its ancient ruins, its congested bazaars, its diplomatic corps and its cocktail parties. My only aim was to get them to Delhi and love it as much as I do. The readers response has been most gratifying and gives me hope that I may achieve my object.

This *Foreword* throws light and gives a peep into the thought process of the author in writing the novel or tabulating the historical events. If anything Khushwant Singh exhibits his deep love for his creation and without saying wishes to urge the reader to regard it as his *magnum opus*.

As an amalgam of history and imagination, with its unique narrative technique alternating between the objectively historical and downright personal, and its journalistic smartness to keep the reader's attention focused (despite numerous excursions into the irrelevant territories not at all germane to the context of the principal narrative concerning Delhi past or present) make *Delhi* a novel *sui generis* in the domain of fiction. For example, take Section 15 (Bhagmati, pp. 233-37). With all authoritativeness the purported author classifies five kinds of farts. He begins on a personal note.

> Farting, is one of the three great joys of life. First, sex; second oil rubbed in scalp full of dandruff; third, a long satisfying fart. With the onset of middle age I have reversed the order of merit: farting now tops my list of life's pleasures.

Khushwant Singh can out-Rabelais Rabelais when it comes to scatological humour. He lets the hoity-toity prudes snicker or draw up their noses- -whatever it pleases them to do- -he is sure of being interesting to the reader. Section 15 is entitled *Bhagmati,* and Bhagmati figures nowhere at all nor finds any mention in it. The narrator is all the time occupied by listing the characteristics of five kinds of farts ranging from truly royal "trumpet" down to the humble, silent "poop", a noiseless stink-bomb which works havoc and is aptly given by the author the sobriquet of "gupta

daan"—undeclared bounty. It is obscene as well as facetious as a journalistic piece, but has nothing to do with history or with Delhi or with Bhagmati or with any other personage in the whole novel. Khushwant Singh's rollicking humour makes nothing of the prudish barriers which keep one off the sexual and excremental explicitness.

With all its "Khushwantisms," *Delhi* remains a unique experiment in the realm of historical fiction. Khushwant Singh followed nobody, nor will anybody be ever able to follow this unique example of writing. The entire book is structurally schematized by the city of Delhi over a period of about a thousand years-from the incipience of the eleventh century to the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the anti-Sikh carnage in 1984. Intercommunal conflicts and confluences mark this long span of history making it look like an extensive chiaroscuro. Communal harmony seems to be the author's desideratum, and disharmony his anathema. The history of Delhi is an intricate mix of the two.

A close look into the schematization of *Delhi* as a creative record of the thousand tumultuous years of its (and India's) history will convince one of the tremendous originally of Khushwant Singh's venture. The whole discourse running over about four hundred pages uses of mélange of voices, only one of them being the clearly authorial one. And even the authorial one is not always clearly Khushwant Singh's. One may even argue that the "I" who lives alone and has a lengthy sexual relationship with Bhagmati, the *hijra* prostitute, is a persona to be glibly equated with the author foursquare. The episodes involving Bhagmati and the quasi-authorial "I" consist of chiefly their variegated love episodes and jaunts to historical tourist spots of Delhi. The author is presented as an inveterate womanizer always on the prowl for any type of catch. And he has an impressive tally of successes from a foreign teenager to Mrs Kamala Gupta- -part Tamil, part North Indian and a mother of two. The novel as described by the author is an attempt "to tell the story of Delhi from its earliest beginnings to the present times" ("A Note from the Author"). The chapters involving the earthy affairs of the purported author and Bhagmati are, in a way not history or "the story of Delhi." However towards the end of the novel they do become "history" when they describe the anti-Sikh riots following the assassination of Mrs Indira Gandhi. The "I" who has so far let other characters speak (Taimur, Bhai Jaita, Aurangzeb, Nadir Shah et al), characters who were makers of history, now himself becomes a sufferer of history. The chapters involving him and Bhagmati have so far been of the nature of interpolations in the historical account of Delhi. The last chapter (21) involving them and like one of them entitled "Bhagmati" is a genuine continuation of the central historical discourse. The author escapes being garlanded with a burning tyre like Budh Singh by the skin of his teeth. The incensed Hindu crowds are thirsting for Sikh blood and Bhagmati-who is Hindu, Muslim et al–stands by him bringing the a blood-soaked millennium of the history of Delhi from the eleventh century to 1984. Inter-communal and inter-ethnic conflicts and compromises, disharmonies and confluences ultimately come full circle and are thrown in bolder relief by the closing pages of the book which encapsulate the central theme of the novel—if of course we may vouchsafe one for it.

Chronologically at the end of the novel, the last episode has a significant centrality. At the very opening of the novel the author begins by likening Delhi with Bhagmati and at the end it is because of the aged and toothless Bhagmati that he manages to see another day in Delhi.

Khushwant Singh uses a subtle technique to unfold a fateful millennium of the history of Delhi which saw the rise and fall of numerous kings and dynasties and bloody conflicts among contending armies aimed at capturing the throne of Delhi and, ipso facto, of India. These conflicts were largely inter-communal or inter-ethnic but they went side by side with movements and characters indicative of communal harmony and conciliation if not of oneness. Khushwant Singh scores his point, among other things by juxtaposing every account of the past with his petty personal affairs in the present, mostly in the company of earthly characters like Budh Singh, Bhagwati and a few others less known ones. *Delhi* is history turned into a novel in this unique manner.

History in *Delhi* is not presented as a narrative coming from an objective historian in an impersonal manner, nor is it narrated by the author subjectively in *propria persona.* Khushwant Singh uses a novel technique which is curiously both objective and subjective. From the pages of history he evokes and revivifies historical figures- -heroes and villains- -and makes them speak out their own version of the truth. Tamerlane, Aurangzeb, Nadir Shah and Bhai Jaita are some of the dozen or so historical figures thus evoked by the novelist. They are both makers and narrators of the history of their respective times. Mostly they give a coloured version of the events involving them, justifying implicitly their barbarity under the cover of their love for Islam and their own version of justice. Each account is, to an extent, an *apologia pro vita sua*–a coloured vindication of largely selfish and even un-Islamic activities under the veneer of selfless actions in the service of Islam.

Before proceeding further let us look at the list of the historical and non-historical persons created or evoked by the novelist as narrators of their respective periods of history. It runs as follows:

1. Musaddi Lal Kaisth of Mehrauli
2. Timur
3. Jaita Rangreta
4. Aurangzeb
5. Nadir Shah
6. Meer Taqi Meer
7. Alice Aldwell
8. Nihal Singh
9. Bahadur Shah Zafar
10. Son of "a builder" of New Delhi
11. Ram Rakha son of Sai Ditta, a refugee from West Pakistan

Out of these eleven while five are makers as well as narrators of the history of Delhi, the remaining six are improvisations of the author and their role as makers of history is zilch, or minimal. The five makers-narrators of history are

1. Timur
2. Jaita Rangreta
3. Aurangzeb
4. Nadir Shah
5. Bahadur Shah Zafar

Out of the remaining six only Meer Taqi Meer is a historical figure, being one of the most celebrated poets of Urdu, but he was only a witness, not a maker, of history. His character as presented by the novelist is largely his own improvisation. Meer is neither a maker nor a notable victim of history. He is only a pitiable prey of a scheming siren who, after her fashion, jilts him for fresher prey.

Musaddi Lal, a thirteenth-century Kaisth, is historically anonymous but a significant creation of the author. Without converting to Islam he and his wife Ram Dulari manage to survive the rabid Islamic regime of king after king. But they are just survivors, not creators of history. Khushwant Singh is probably at his best as a historian when creating such characters as them. They don't shape history, but how history shapes them is also something of great interest to a reader. Alice Aldwell, an Anglo-Indian, who comes to live in Delhi from Kolkata around the time of the Mutiny (War of Independence) in 1857 is witness to tumultuous events terminating in the banishment of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal King of India and the firm entrenchment of the British rulers. She is a close witness of, as well as a peripheral character in, the historical annals of nineteenth-century India. Nihal Singh, too, is often no specific historical counterpart. Recruited by Hodson (a historical British officer who commanded native as well as British soldiers for quelling the 1857 uprising) he is a typical (but non-historical) sturdy Sikh soldier. Nihal Singh admires the British for their cool courage, aplomb, gallantry and justness. Moreover, he is happy to fight against the descendants of the Mughals who had been unjustly cruel to the revered Gurus of the Sikhs.

The son of one of the "builders" of New Delhi named Sujan Singh has, like Nihal Singh, no historical *locus standi.* He could be anybody from anywhere in India engaged in the project of building New Delhi as the new capital of India after 1911 when the capital of India was shifted by Lord Irwin from Kolkata. The builder's son (who has an autobiographical touch) is not a builder of history but is a witness to a lot of events which preceded India's independence, chiefly bomb attacks on the rulers. Lastly, Ram Rakha, a refugee from the same village as the builder's son, is also a purely fictional character. Unlike the builder's son, however, Ram Rakha plays a fairly active role in killing Muslims and Mahatma Gandhi for his pro-Muslim bias. Having lost his young sister to Muslim abductors he yearns to have it out on Gandhi and the Muslims in Delhi. He joins the RSS cadres to carry out constant reconnaissance of Birla House where Gandhi lives, fasts and holds his daily prayers. Ram Rakha's heartfelt grief at the death of Gandhi is an unexpectedly touching reversal of expectations from a committed ideologue of the kind Ram Rakha had become through his association with hardliners. This episode of this depiction is one of Khushwant Singh's undoubted triumphs as a fictionist.

Thus we observe Khushwant Singh's familiarity with Delhi and his acumen, intellect and delineation of historical figures from all ages, communities, strata and background. It is partly chronological and partly autobiographical. We have a potpourri of historical personages along with the Sikh narrator and his paraphernalia comprising the length and breadth of Delhi as well as of this narrative about Delhi. This fusion delights us. But we are indeed impressed by the deep and sustained researches of the writer into history. *Delhi*, without doubt informs us a lot. All the same, *Delhi* is a piece of literature, a novel, and in all fairness, we must look at it in the same novel.

Delhi makes us oscillate between past and present. It is a novel of evocation, evoking the things which are a part of the past, a distant or recent, of nostalgia, of varying moods and emotional configurations. What makes *Delhi* a novel *sui generis* is that it remains firmly anchored in the present even as it freely ranges over the past—remote as well as recent. The earthly characters (chiefly Bhagmati and the no less earthly author himself, in propria persona, and his friends and servants) look like parts of the vast sweep of history which integrates all the disparate elements into a single vast continuum without any rationalizable termini or even hiatuses. As such it will not be off the mark to describe *Delhi* as the ultimate historical novel or as a fictional image of the history of Delhi.

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