Depiction of History in Khushwant Singh's Novel: Delhi

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an attempt to study the history as portrayed by Khushwant Singh’s novel Delhi which was published in 1990. The novelist has captured the real history of Delhi and to make it more interesting he has portrayed real and fictitious characters in the present novel.

INTRODUCTION

Many writers employ history in their works to build the literary works. In historical works the writers pick up the historical incidents and add something of their own to make it interesting. The writers may add one or more fictional characters or events, or may change the sequence of historical events. Historical fiction may center on historical or on fictional characters, but usually represents an honest attempt based on considerable research to tell a story set in the historical past as understood by the author's contemporaries. One of the greatest writers of Indo English literature is Khushwant Singh. He deals with the historical events in his many novels and short stories. His vast and profound knowledge and understanding of India's history, political systems, and literary heritage is reflected in his prose works which included a history of his own community, The Sikhs, published in 1963. His famous novels are Train to Pakistan (1956) deals with the theme of partition of India in 1947, I Shall Not Hear the Nightingale (1961); and Delhi (1990), a picaresque history of India's capital narrated by a eunuch. Apart from these he has also translated many works into English.

DEPICTION OF HISTORY IN NOVEL: DELHI

In the present novel Delhi (1990) Khushwant Singh depicts the history of India, i.e. many historical incidents of Delhi through the real and fictitious characters. The entire novel is narrated in past and present tense. The first and last chapters which are narrated in present is very interesting than the other chapters.

The novelist begins the "reliving" of the past of Delhi with the times of Ghausuddin Balban and of sufis saint, Nizamuddin Aulia. It is essentially a time of great transition, and society is in a state of flux. Khushwant Singh focuses on that society of Delhi. Perhaps it is a time of bigotry, and also a time of reconciliation and reintegration, made possible, through the self-sacrificing efforts of sufis saints like Nizamuddin. The novelist introduces a fictitious character named Musaddi Lal, a new Hindu kayastha convert to Islam, the transitional times of Delhi are poignantly viewed at. The life of the new convert to Islam along with his wife stands as testimony to the fast changing society of Delhi. For the ironic and comic vein adopted by the novelist, the reader would have been swept by the winds of prejudices. The comic and ironic mode of the novelist helps him and readers rise above prejudices, and lighten the weight of the subject. The predicament of Musaddi Lal, presented in a comic manner, speaks of him and also of many:

I was disowned by the Hindus and shunned by my 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 (Singh: 1990, 2).

During this time many surviours were there who came forward to save the Hindu. Nizamuddin tried to save Musaddi Lal in his life from the tyranny of the ruler. Khushwant Singh writes:

Nizamuddin was our umbrella against the burning sun of Muslim bigotry and the downpour of Hindu contempt (Singh: 1990, 105).

The above statement clarifies the views of religion and here Nizamuddin stands as a pillar of sanity amidst the prevailing frenzy of bigotry. The Oxford History of India states that Nizamuddin was a great saintly person who has won the hearts of the Hindus and others and also tried to spread Islam in India in a faster and easier way than the other Mughal emperors.

The novelist efforts to focus on the Taimur result in an 'almost convincing' argument for the invasion of Taimur against India. It is aptly suggested that behind the facade of holy wars, there lies the question of personal ambitions and interests who take precedence always. It is also made clear that most of the rulers and the people, irrespective of their religious affiliations, are simply men of their times only.
Hence, one does not wonder at the expression of smugness by Taimur. It is no wonder a book of history which views Taimur from another perspective and enlists the devastation caused by him during the invasion. In Banda bairagi’s episode it is very much clearly seen that he tried his best to spread the Sikh religion among the lower classes of the society of Delhi and he also helped them to develop the self esteem of their own. But the history labeled him as an imposter only. Apart from these characters the novelist has also focused on the other real historical characters like Aurangzeb, Nadir Shah, Meer Taqi Meer, Bahadur Shah Zafar etc in his present novel. He has mainly focused on the multi faced personality of Aurangzeb and portrayed him as the god-fearing person. After the fall of mighty Aurangzeb, Delhi was under the weak ruler which shows the fall of Delhi. Khushwant Singh has also captured the scene of 1857, the year of ‘First War of Independence’. During this period all sections of the people including Europeans have suffered. Perhaps in certain cases victims have turned into perpetrators of oppression and vice versa.

The novel also marginally takes into consideration the havoc that was wreaked upon Delhi and a part of India during the partition and during the post-partition period. In the caricature of Mahatma Gandhi and in the fictionalization of his assassination, the novelist points out the corrupting influence of evil of bigotry and violence on the young minds as seen in the person of Mahatma’s assassin, Nathuram and also the ultimate and undying victory of Mahatma over violence, and the sustenance of the voice of sanity.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Khushwant Singh’s Delhi represents the real history of Delhi and the novelist has tried his best to make it interesting with the fictitious characters and some additional incidents. Khushwant Singh, in a real sense is a history lover.

REFERENCES