

Words of Wisdom in Khushwant Singh's Novel *Delhi*



Krishna Gopal

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of Applied Sciences and
Humanities,
Rama University,
Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh

Abstract

Khushwant Singh (1915-2014) is a well known Indian writer who chose to write in English. He was a prominent editor, historian and a journalist par excellence. His novel '*Delhi*' though a work of fiction, is a store house of knowledge. It contains words of wisdom that will make a reader wiser and equip him to face the various challenges of the world in a better way. The wisdom from Arabia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, India and other countries is revealed very subtly through the dialogues. All this comes to us very naturally.

This paper is an attempt to investigate the author's depth of knowledge and understanding with reference to the social & political background in the novel *Delhi*. His descriptions are vivid and the characters appear real. At times he employs imagination like any other author of fiction does but a cord of realism passes through the novel. *Delhi* is the result of his twenty year long in-depth research of history and archeology.

Keywords: Sufism, Philosophy, Archeological, Chronicles, Islam

Introduction

The novel *Delhi* is a storehouse of historical knowledge and words of wisdom. Though it is a work of fiction yet the work is not purely fictional. The novel is based on extensive and in-depth historical and archeological research. It contains episodes and incidents which add to the readers' knowledge and wisdom. The author took twenty five years to complete the novel. Khushwant Singh was of the view that a literary work should entertain and educate. His novel *Delhi* achieves both these objectives.

In the Foreword of the novel, the author writes;

"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."¹

Based on his thorough research, the author recreated the drama that took place on the stage of Delhi over a period spanning several centuries. There are stories of individuals, communities, and dynasties. It offers an impartial commentary on social life, political background and religious beliefs of people who lived in Delhi.

In 'A Note from the Author', Khushwant Singh says;

"In this novel I have tried to tell the story of Delhi from its earliest beginnings to the present times. I constructed it from records chronicled by eye- witnesses. Hence most of it is told in the first person. History provided me with the skeleton. I covered it with flesh and a blood..."²

The author takes the reader back in time. The reader relives history as it unfolds before him through the scenes recreated by the author. Throughout the novel the author remains objective and impartial. The description is so vivid that the reader can easily visualize the scenes and the events unfold before his eyes. Everything appears to be real. We learn author's views on a number of subjects that hold important place in our life. A few of the subjects dealt within the novel are discussed below.

On Death

Once overtaken by heavy depression, the author visits Nigambodh Ghat cremation ground on the Jamuna in Delhi. He gets moved by what he sees there.

"Down the steps running into the river is a corpse draped in a red shroud. A dozen men and women are screaming and beating their breasts. A Brahmin priest pushes them aside, chants Sanskrit mumbo-jumbo and sprinkles water on the body. A middle aged man uncovers its face. It's a young girl- very waxen and in deep slumber. The man

stares at her face, moans and shakes his face in disbelief. A woman on the other side of the corpse smacks her forehead many times and clasps the dead girl in her arms. Other people gently remove the wailing couple and cover up the face of the corpse.”³

He vividly describes the scene further;

“The pyre is ready. The corpse is lifted and placed on it.... A man lights a stick with a bundle of rags soaked in kerosene and takes the torch round the pyre. It bursts into flames.”⁴

He further adds;

“I leave Nigambodh Ghat with the heat of the flames on my face and the helpless cry of the stricken parents ringing in my ears. There is a real grief! It stabs through the heart like a needle. There, but for the grace of God, it could have been I pouring dust onto my head to mourn the death of my child! Here, by the grace of God, I am driving my Ambassador back to my apartment! What are my irritations, envies and frustrations compared to the sorrow of the people I have left behind! They will go and miss their daughter. I'll get home and drink my Scotch.”⁵

Compare this with a very famous English proverb. “I cried because I had no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet.”

In the last paragraph of this chapter Khushwant Singh offers an advice to the readers,

“When life gets too much for you, all you need to do is to spend an hour at Nigambodh Ghat, watch the dead being put to the flames and hear their kin wail for them. Then come home and down a couple of pegs of whisky.”⁶

One may or may not agree with the recipe (consumption of whisky) prescribed by Khushwant Singh to overcome depression but he certainly makes a very important point.

One has to agree that visit to a cremation ground and attending a funeral do remind one of the transient nature of the world and mortal nature of man. One need not go into depression over trivial matters of life.

The very thought of death is highly depressing for most of us. It generally fills an individual's heart with fear, grief and depression. Death strips a man of all his worldly possessions in a moment which he acquires through long years of great toil and much more than that. Death is the time to say goodbye to the world and leave every worldly possession behind.

Various religions and philosophic schools have tried to solve the riddles called death and life. *The Geeta* for instance consoles us by saying that death is inevitable, and therefore there is no need to grieve for the inevitable.

Khushwant Singh offers a unique and strange remedy for depression. For him death (of others) is an occasion to celebrate life and drown the thoughts of depression in a glass of whisky. It may sound strange to some of us but Khushwant Singh finds it very effective. He followed what he preached.

Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya

In chapter four Khushwant Singh pours out the wisdom of Hazrat Shaikh Khwaja Syed Muhammad bin Abdullah AlHussaini popularly

known as Nizamuddin Aulia (1238-1325), the Sufi *derwish* of Ghiaspur. Hazrat Nizamuddin was once charged of heresy. He had to defend himself in the court of sultan Ghiasuddin Balban. Hazrat Nizamuddin's answers amply illustrate why he is still loved by both Hindus and Muslims several hundred years after his demise. He was the soft face of Islam. He emphasized love and harmony. He presented the picture of Islam opposed to what is being practiced by ISIS today. He understood that the religions should coexist in peace. Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya said:“ I do not make any distinction between Mussalmans and Hindus as I consider both to be children of God. ... I believe that the best way to serve God is through love of his creatures. ... Allah cannot be understood through knowledge of books or through logic. God is an experience.”⁷

Further Khwaja Sahib's words are quoted thus;

“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 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 maze of deception.”⁸

These lines are enough to illustrate the relevance of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia and his school of thought in solving many of the conflicts of modern times.

Khushwant Singh quotes some catechisms of Khwaja Sahib which he (Khwaja Sahib) made his disciples memorize.

Who is the wisest of the wise men?

One who rejects the world.

Who is the saintliest of all saints?

One who refuses to change with changing circumstances.

Who is the richest of rich men?

One who is content.

Who is the neediest of the needy?

*One who has no contentment.*⁹

Some one asked Khwaja Sahib, “How to be content?” He replied, “Reduce your wants to the barest minimum, conquer your *nafs* (desires).”¹⁰

This is what the Yoga is all about. Compare this with the thought given in Patanjali Yoga Sutras. *Yogashchittavrittinirodhah*¹¹

Yoga is restraining the mind-stuff (Chitta) from taking various forms (Vrittis).

These words of Khwaja Nizamuddin Sahib (1238-1325) are the proof why he is revered in India and the neighbouring countries even today. His words are as relevant today as they were more than seven centuries ago. His words promote peaceful co-existence of people following different religions and representing different cultures.

Wisdom from Other Sources

Khushwant Singh quotes words of wisdom from different religions. He writes one incident from the life of the Prophet Musa (Moses).

“Musa heard a poor shepherd praying, 'Where art Thou that I may serve Thee? I will mend

Thy boots, give Thee milk from my goats.' Musa reprimanded the shepherd for so speaking to God. God in His turn reprimanded Musa. 'Thou has driven away one of my true servants.'¹²

Here is one more incident described in the novel:

"It was again to the Prophet Musa that Allah conveyed the essence of true religion.

The Almighty said. 'I was sick, and you did not come to see me. I was hungry, and you did not give me food.'

Musa asked, 'My God, can you also be sick and hungry?'

God replied, 'My servant so-and-so was sick, and my servant so-and-so was hungry. If you had visited one and fed the other, you would have found me with them.'¹³

These two quotes emphasize the value of service to the poor. Every religion of the world recognizes that service to mankind is real worship of God.

And here are some worldly observations made by the author:

"The rich only make friends with the rich. The clever only like admirers and flatterers."¹⁴

And he further quotes a verse translated from Persian.

*It does not behove a man of wisdom
By his own tongue to praise himself.*¹⁵

These lines highlight the value of modesty.

Then the author goes on to criticize those who dwell in pride and behave arrogantly.

*"Tell this fool whose arrogance makes his neck veins swell! Pride corrupts religion, weakens the mind, destroys reputations. So take heed!"*¹⁶

He suggests readers to make best of life, also warns us to remember that the world is transitory.

*'When in garden enjoy every moment,
Every moment of every day.*

Spring passes into summer, summer into autumn,

*And the flowers of henna
Shall wither away.'*¹⁷

At the same time the author points out the danger of falling in the trap of desires. To do so he quotes Shaikh Saadi (1210-1292), the famous poet from Shiraz, Iran.

*"He whose wishes you fulfil will obey your orders But passion when obeyed, will forever command."*¹⁸

(Account as an enemy the passion which is between thy two loins.)

Khushwant Singh then writes about anger. He quotes, "Anger is a species of madness."¹⁹

He further highlights the significance of keeping anger in control:

'If you do not learn to control your temper your temper will control you.'

'..... anger is a species of madness. If not checked, it becomes incurable.'²⁰

In chapter 12 of the novel the author tells that even the Emperors have their own limitations. In other words he highlights the message that no man is omnipotent.

"An Emperor may command anything within his empire except an honest man and a woman's heart."²¹

And here is the gem of his quotes:

"And what is a woman's" body worth if her heart not be in it!²²

Here he emphasizes the value of a woman's heart. This is a bold message to those who treat women as a commodity. In recent times we have heard about ISIS and their sex slaves. He has raised a very important issue- that of a woman's willingness in love.

From the realm of morality and model code of conduct he moves on to tell us the importance of making progress and keeping abreast with the changing times. For change is the only constant in this world. He writes:

"The world changes very fast and there is very little time to catch up with it. The road of life is also very uneven; you must watch your steps. Whatever time you have, devote it to knowing yourself."²³

Compare this with a famous quote of Albert Einstein

"Life is like riding a bicycle. To keep your balance, you must keep moving."

On Love

The author also writes on the nature of love and its significance in our life.

"It is love that maintains the universe. All that you see in the world is a different manifestation of love. Fire is the heat of love, earth its foundation, air its restlessness, night its dream-state, day its wakefulness."²⁴

And also;

"Of all the crimes listed in the Holy *Shariyat*, the worst is to betray a woman who has willingly given herself to you."²⁵

Here are the views of the famous Urdu poet Meer Taqi Meer on love:

"Love is an affliction which spares no one, neither the old nor the young, neither married nor single."²⁶

And;

It is love and only love whichever way you look;

Love is stacked from the earth below to the sky above;

Love is the beloved, love is the lover too,

In short, love itself is in love with love.

Without love none can their goal attain,

Love is desire, love its ultimate aim.

Love is anguish, love the antidote of love's pain.

O wise man, what know you what love is?

Without love the order of the Universe would be broken

*God is love, truly have the poets spoken."*²⁷

"Better be enchained, locked up, even die in dungeon than be enmeshed in the nest of love and longing."²⁸

"Friend Meer, do everything your heart desires but never let it fall in love; love spares neither lover nor beloved."²⁹

"Passions have made mortals of us men
If men were not slaves of passion
They would have been Gods, each one,"³⁰

"A heart on fire needs a stream of tears to put it out; a drop or two only makes it burn more fiercely."³¹

"No matter a city can be rebuilt and repopulated but no power on earth can put together a heart that has been shattered."³²

These words need no explanation. Readers are wise enough to interpret these lines in their own way. Haven't all of us experienced some of these feelings in our own life!

Aim of the Study

This paper aims at illustrating the fact that even a work of fiction may contain useful information and gems of truth. *Delhi* (the novel) has been classified as a work of fiction. There are passages where the author has taken the liberty to create vivid images that may be said to be close to erotica. But a reader's discretion is very important. Hidden under the garb of sensational entertainment are the gems of truth and words of wisdom too. A wise reader will not fail to appreciate it.

Conclusion

Khushwant Singh (1915-2014) was not only the most popular journalist of his time but also very influential one. The novel *Delhi* conclusively proves its author's superb skills as a story teller with a difference. The novel is a mirror of the Indian society- its people, history, legacy and culture.

The author depicts the incidents very vividly. *Delhi* successfully makes a mark in the literary world. It is one of the most talked about novels of Khushwant Singh like *The Train to Pakistan*. The *Delhi* is a bouquet of interesting characters carved after extensive research in history. They are very lively and look real. The author conveys wisdom of saints and the learned through the novel.

Khushwant Singh believed that a literary work should be entertaining and convey message. One may agree with him, one may disagree with him but it is difficult to ignore him.

References

1. Singh, Khushwant. *Delhi*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India (P) Limited, 1990. Print
2. *Ibid*
3. *Ibid* p.p. 11
4. *Ibid* p.p. 12
5. *Ibid* p.p. 12
6. *Ibid* p.p. 12
7. *Ibid* p.p. 56
8. *Ibid* p.p. 67
9. *Ibid* p.p. 68
10. *Ibid* p.p. 68
11. Patanjali Yoga Sutras 1:2
12. Singh, Khushwant. *Delhi*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India (P) Limited, 1990. Print p.p. 68
13. *Ibid* p.p. 68
14. *Ibid* p.p. 71
15. *Ibid* p.p. 73

16. *Ibid* p.p. 64
17. *Ibid* p.p. 150
18. *Ibid* p.p. 170
19. *Ibid* p.p. 183
20. *Ibid* p.p. 188-189
21. *Ibid* p.p. 192
22. *Ibid* p.p. 192
23. *Ibid* p.p. 195
24. *Ibid* p.p. 196
25. *Ibid* p.p. 202
26. *Ibid* p.p. 220
27. *Ibid* p.p. 199-200
28. *Ibid* p.p. 222
29. *Ibid* p.p. 223
30. *Ibid* p.p. 210
31. *Ibid* p.p. 219
32. *Ibid* p.p. 220