



**International Journal of English Literature and
Literary Theories**

International Peer Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LITERATURE AND LITERARY THEORIES (IJELLT)

ISSN: 3107-6505

Vol.:2: Issue: 5: 2026.

(International Peer Reviewed and refereed English Journal)

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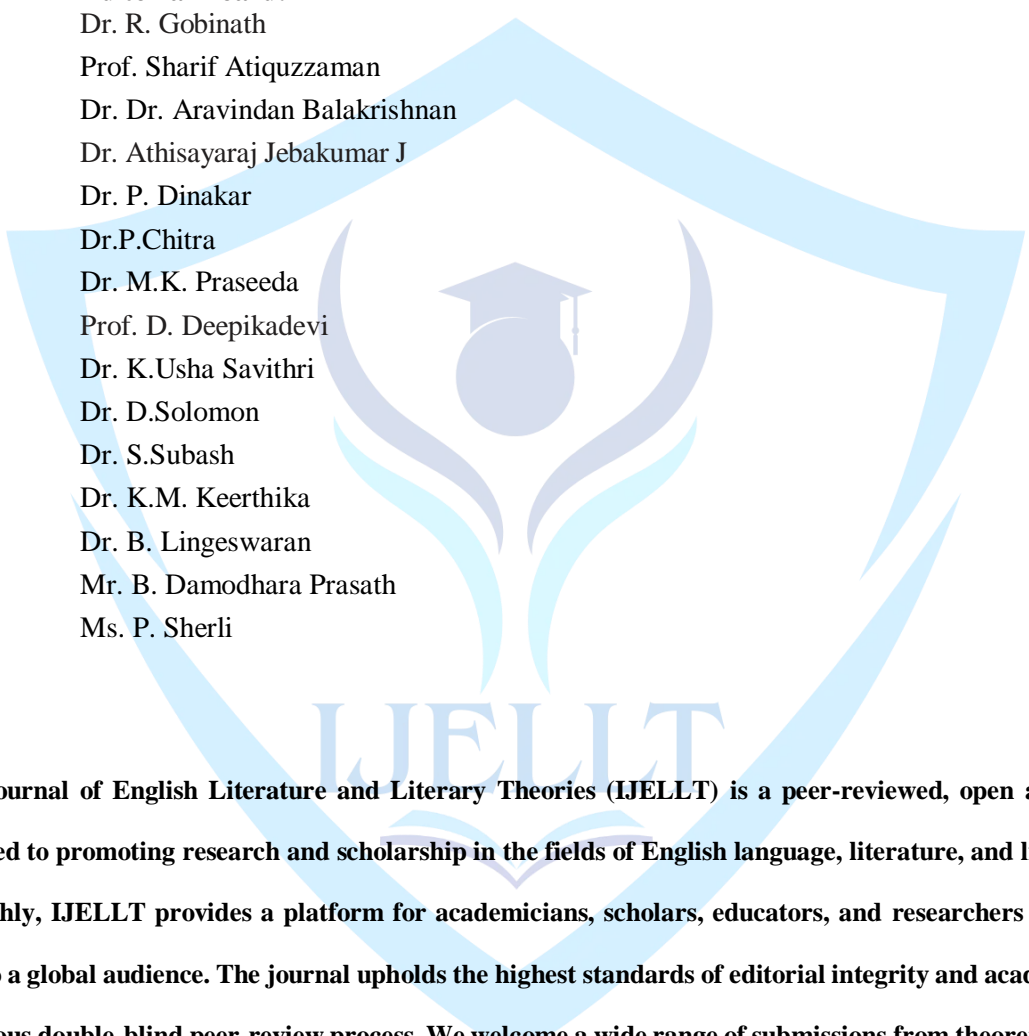
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Literary Theories

The City as Witness: History and Human Experience in Khushwant Singh's Delhi: A Novel

Gurjant Singh, PhD, Research Scholar, Desh Bhagat University, Punjab, India.

Dr.Imtiyaz Ahmad Bhat, Assistant Professor English Desh Bhagat University, Punjab, India.

Abstract: This paper explores how Khushwant Singh's Delhi: A Novel reimagines the city of Delhi not as a geographical location but as an active participant in history and human experience, using fragmented narration, multiple historical voices, satire, and personal memory to reconstruct Delhi as a space molded by conquest, violence, cultural hybridity, displacement, and survival. The paper argues that Singh challenges traditional historiography by prioritizing marginalized experiences, subjective memory, and everyday realities that are typically excluded from official historical narratives. Using this approach, the novel presents history not as a linear or stable process but fragmented, cyclical, and closely linked to political power and human suffering. It further depicts Delhi as a historical archive, a haunted urban landscape, and a symbolic representation of postcolonial Indian identity.

Keywords: Khushwant Singh, Delhi: A Novel, historiography, memory, violence, urban space, postcolonialism, identity, trauma.



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Introduction

Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel* occupies a prominent place in postcolonial Indian English literature, owing to its complex depiction of history, memory and the identity of the city. Published in 1990, the novel goes beyond the conventions of historical fiction, presenting Delhi only as a physical place, but as a living historical presence shaped by centuries of conquest, violence, political transition and cultural exchange. Through fragmented narrative and shifting historical perspectives, Singh reconstructs the city as a layered space, where personal and public memory intersects with public history.

The novel challenges the idea of history as objective or unified. Instead, it foregrounds discontinuity, contradiction, and multiplicity. Delhi emerges as a city inhabited simultaneously by emperors, refugees, laborers, prostitutes, saints, colonizers, and marginalized communities whose experiences collectively shape the historical consciousness of the narrative. Singh therefore shifts attention away from official political histories toward lived human realities marked by fear, displacement, desire, survival, and emotional vulnerability.

The relationship between urban space and historical consciousness forms one of the central concerns of the novel. Henri Lefebvre argues that "(social) space is a (social) product" (26), suggesting that cities are shaped through historical, political, and cultural processes. This idea becomes especially relevant in *Delhi: A Novel*, where the city reflects successive layers of invasion, empire, colonialism, Partition, and postcolonial instability. Similarly, Michel de Certeau describes the city as "a text" produced through the movements and experiences of its inhabitants (93). Singh transforms Delhi into precisely such a textual space where memory, violence, and everyday life continuously interact.

The novel also destabilizes dominant narratives of nation and identity. Homi K. Bhabha argues that cultural identity emerges through "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference" (*The Location of Culture* 2). Delhi represents this state of diversity and conflict. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, British colonizers, migrants, and marginalized individuals exist amidst tension and instability, turning the city into a symbolic reflection of India's divided cultural identity.

Singh adds complexity to historical storytelling by intertwining recorded events with satire, sexuality, rumor, emotional revelations, and personal recollections. Linda Hutcheon observes that historiographic metafiction “installs and then blurs the line between fiction and history” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 113). This description closely aligns with Singh’s narrative style, where historical reality is filtered through irony, personal experience, and fragmented memory rather than detached documentation. Hayden White similarly argues that historical narratives are “verbal fictions” shaped by interpretation and narrative construction (*Tropics of Discourse* 82). In *Delhi: A Novel*, history is therefore represented not as stable truth but as contested memory.

The human aspect of the novel stays remains equally central to its thematic structure. Singh consistently emphasizes physical existence, isolation, sexuality, dislocation, and anxiety in conjunction with political turmoil. Through refugees, workers, sex workers, panhandlers, and hijras, the novel revives voices frequently omitted from formal historical accounts. Edward Said notes that stories play a crucial role in representing suppressed histories and experiences (*Culture and Imperialism* xii). Singh’s interpretation likewise shifts history to focus on ordinary people, whose emotional misery and survival become inseparable from the historical experience of the city.

Ultimately, *Delhi: A Novel* presents Delhi as both witness and participant in history. The city absorbs memories of conquest, communal violence, political corruption, and social transformation while continuing to endure through constant reconstruction and survival. This paper examines how Singh uses fragmented historiography, marginalized voices, urban memory, and historical trauma to transform Delhi into a symbolic archive of postcolonial Indian experience.

Delhi as a Historical Witness

Khushwant Singh presents Delhi as a city profoundly shaped by the burdens of history. Memories of invasion, destruction, political transition, and communal violence continue to influence everyday existence, transforming the city into a living archive of human suffering and survival. Rather than romanticizing Delhi as a monument of imperial grandeur, Singh foregrounds its contradictions, decay, and emotional intensity.

The narrator introduces the city in strikingly ambivalent terms:

I return to Delhi as I return to my mistress Bhagmati when I have had my fill of 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. ... To the stranger Delhi may appear like a gangrenous accretion of noisy bazaars and mean-looking hovels growing round a few tumble-down forts and mosques along a dead river (Singh 1).

The imagery of “gangrenous accretion,” “tumble-down forts,” and “dead river” reveals a city scarred by repeated violence and exploitation. Yet beneath this decay lies a persistent vitality that continues to inspire attachment and belonging. Delhi survives not because it escapes destruction but because it repeatedly absorbs and outlives it.

This relationship between destruction and endurance becomes central to Singh’s historical vision. The city carries visible traces of earlier civilizations through monuments, ruins, mosques, tombs, and marketplaces. Gopal Verma observes that “the remnants of these buildings speak of history and so function as narrators” (159). Delhi therefore becomes more than a setting; it functions as an active witness preserving memories of conquest, displacement, and communal conflict.

The novel also shifts historical authority away from rulers and official institutions toward ordinary individuals and marginalized communities. Refugees, prostitutes, laborers, beggars, and socially excluded figures experience history not as abstract political transformation but as emotional and bodily reality. Alberto Fernández Carbajal argues that “the Sikh narrator and his hijra lover become the witnesses of India’s modern history” (64). Through these figures, Singh challenges conventional historiography that privileges kings and empires while neglecting human suffering.

The persistence of history is reinforced through recurring images of haunting and psychological trauma. Reflecting upon the city, the narrator confesses: “All my life I have been tormented by ghosts. Since Delhi has more ghosts than any other city in the world, life in Delhi can be one long nightmare.” (Singh 164)

The metaphor of ghosts symbolizes unresolved memories of violence, massacre, and displacement that continue to inhabit the city. Delhi appears haunted by its past, where earlier histories repeatedly intrude upon the present. Historical trauma survives through ruins, monuments, and collective memory, transforming the city into a psychologically charged urban landscape.

At the same time, Singh portrays Delhi as a city defined by contradiction. Civilization coexists with brutality, spirituality with corruption, and historical grandeur with urban decay. Through irony and fragmentation, Singh dismantles idealized visions of Indian history and instead presents Delhi as a fractured historical consciousness shaped by both achievement and destruction. The city remembers what official histories often attempt to erase, thereby acquiring symbolic agency within the narrative itself.

Violence, Trauma, and Historical Haunting in Delhi: A Novel

Violence occupies a central position in *Delhi: A Novel*, shaping both the historical structure of the narrative and the emotional lives of its characters. Singh portrays Delhi as a city repeatedly devastated by invasions, massacres, Partition riots, communal conflicts, and political oppression. Rather than presenting violence as isolated historical incidents, the novel depicts brutality as cyclical and deeply embedded within the social consciousness of the city.

The novel refuses to romanticize conflict and instead exposes its physical and psychological consequences with disturbing realism. During the Partition sequences, the narrator witnesses scenes of extreme brutality:

We crossed the Indo-Pakistan border. There were many more corpses along the road. From the shape of their penises I could tell they were Mussalmans. There were lots of women and children among the dead (Singh 352)

The bluntness of this description intensifies the horror of communal violence. Human beings are reduced to religious identities even in death, exposing the dehumanizing effects of political hatred. Through such scenes, Singh dismantles nationalist idealism by foregrounding bodily suffering, displacement, and trauma.

Violence in the novel repeatedly appears as an instrument of political and religious power. Historical rulers justify conquest through ideology and faith while ordinary individuals bear the consequences of these struggles. Timur's narration illustrates this relationship between violence and authority:

“We destroyed, as we had undertaken to do, many temples of idolatry... Under the eyes of the pleading, wailing priests we smashed the idol with our hands and ordered the priests to be beheaded.”
(Singh 461)

The religious justification accompanying massacre reveals how political authority manipulates ideology to legitimize brutality. Singh avoids reducing violence to a single community or historical period; instead, he demonstrates how cruelty transcends dynasties, religions, and political systems. The traumatic impact of violence also extends beyond immediate destruction. Memories of suffering continue to haunt the city psychologically and culturally. Delhi emerges as a haunted urban space where the past remains permanently alive within ruins, monuments, and collective consciousness. Carbajal remarks that the novel exposes “the traumatic and cyclical nature of Partition violence” (63). Historical trauma therefore survives across generations rather than remaining confined to a single historical moment.

At the same time, Singh emphasizes human endurance amidst catastrophe. Refugees, laborers, women, and marginalized communities continue to survive despite instability, fear, and displacement. The city itself embodies this resilience. Delhi repeatedly suffers destruction yet continues to endure through reconstruction and memory. Violence exposes the fragility of civilization, but it also reveals the persistence of human existence within historical catastrophe.

Fragmented Historiography and Narrative Technique

One of the most distinctive aspects of *Delhi: A Novel* is its fragmented narrative structure through which Singh challenges conventional forms of historical narration. Rather than presenting history as a unified and objective account of political events, the novel constructs the past through multiple voices, shifting perspectives, and discontinuous historical episodes. Emperors, saints, refugees, poets, colonizers, and ordinary citizens narrate different moments of Delhi's history, creating a polyphonic narrative where historical truth appears unstable and contested.

The fragmented structure of the novel reflects the instability of historical memory itself. Singh abruptly shifts across centuries, moving from the Delhi Sultanate to Mughal rule, colonialism, Partition, and post-independence India without maintaining linear continuity. These temporal dislocations create the impression that history survives not as chronological order but as overlapping memory.

Gopal Verma observes that the novel “embraces a large number of autonomous, dissonant voices” and that “Delhi is a site/text/persona that assumes multiple identities” (156). Similarly, Anita Singh remarks that the narrator, “travelling in time, space and history... discovers his beloved city Delhi: her invasions and possessions are revealed through the network of intricate metaphors” (156). Through these narrative shifts, Singh transforms Delhi into a layered historical consciousness where past and present continuously intersect.

The use of first-person historical narrators further complicates historiography. Figures such as Timur, Aurangzeb, and Bahadur Shah Zafar narrate events from subjective positions shaped by political ambition, fear, greed, and ideology. Singh therefore dismantles the illusion of neutral historical objectivity by exposing the personal and ideological motives underlying historical authority.

The novel also blurs the boundary between documented history and fiction. Historical events coexist with satire, sexuality, memory, gossip, and emotional confession. Verma observes that “the subjective format of the narration brings history and its political impact to life” (167). Singh’s concern is not merely to reproduce historical facts but to reveal how political violence and social upheaval are emotionally experienced by ordinary individuals.

The fragmented structure additionally reflects the fractured cultural identity of postcolonial India. Sacredness coexists with vulgarity, spirituality with corruption, and imperial grandeur with decay. Shaista Andleeb, Muhammad Asif Khan, and Shahzad Ahmad describe Singh’s narrative as “the art of paradox” (336). Delhi simultaneously embodies hope and despair, continuity and destruction, civilization and brutality.

Through fragmentation, irony, and multiple voices, Singh democratizes historical discourse by including experiences traditionally excluded from official narratives. The novel ultimately presents history not as singular truth but as a contested field shaped by memory, power, violence, and human experience.

Bhagmati as the Symbolic Body of Delhi

Among the many complex figures in *Delhi: A Novel*, Bhagmati occupies a uniquely significant position because she functions simultaneously as an individual character, a marginalized identity, and a symbolic embodiment of the city itself. Through Bhagmati, Singh destabilizes rigid structures of gender, morality, religion, and cultural identity while deepening the novel's exploration of Delhi as a fractured yet enduring historical space.

From the opening pages, Singh establishes a symbolic relationship between Bhagmati and the city: "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." (Singh 1)

Both Delhi and Bhagmati are represented as violated, exploited, marginalized, and emotionally compelling. Alberto Fernández Carbajal argues that "Bhagmati is constructed as a metonym for Delhi" (63). Her fragmented identity reflects the fragmented historical and cultural identity of the city itself. Bhagmati's position as a hijra is particularly significant because it destabilizes fixed categories of identity. The narrator openly admits: "I cannot fix any labels to this diminutive yet strong, sexless yet bawdy woman." (Singh 21)

The contradictory language of "sexless yet bawdy" reflects Bhagmati's resistance to stable social classification. Through her character, Singh challenges normative structures of gender and morality while exposing the hypocrisy underlying social respectability.

Bhagmati also represents the plural and syncretic identity of Delhi. She moves across religious and social boundaries with fluidity, resisting communal and ideological rigidity. Carbajal notes that Bhagmati offers "an inclusive vision of post-Partition Delhi" (67). Her character therefore stands in opposition to the communal divisions and political conflicts that repeatedly produce violence within the city. At the same time, Bhagmati's body becomes a site where historical and social violence are visibly inscribed. Like Delhi itself, she bears the marks of exploitation, humiliation, and exclusion. Yet Singh does not portray her merely as a victim. Bhagmati survives through wit, obscenity, emotional intelligence, and resilience. Gopal Verma remarks that Bhagmati "is not simply a character who serves as a sexual partner for the narrator but is an intrinsic chain in the historical narration of Delhi's past" (158).

Bhagmati ultimately symbolizes the contradictory essence of Delhi itself: wounded yet enduring, fragmented yet alive. Through her character, Singh foregrounds identities and experiences excluded from dominant historical narratives while challenging rigid notions of morality, nationalism, and cultural purity.

Conclusion

Delhi: A Novel presents Delhi not merely as a geographical setting or political capital but as a living historical presence shaped by conquest, violence, memory, and survival. Through fragmented narration, multiple historical voices, irony, and marginalized perspectives, Khushwant Singh transforms the city into an active witness to the complexities of Indian history.

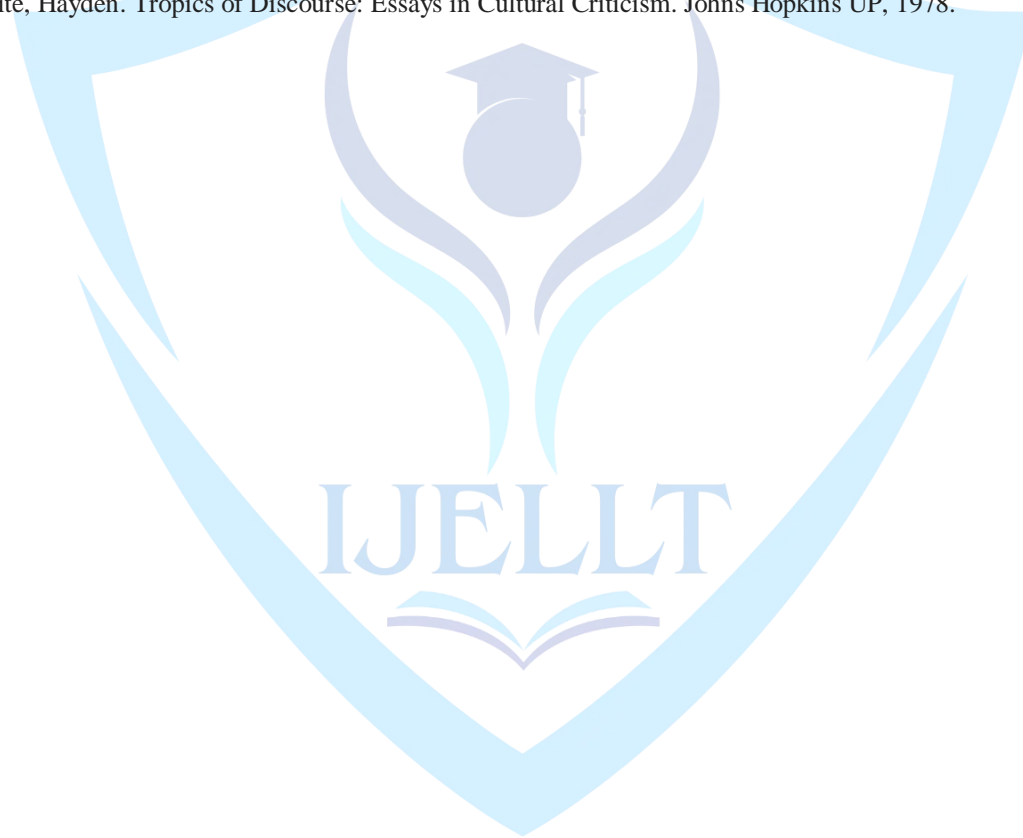
The novel challenges conventional historiography by rejecting linear and authoritative representations of the past. Instead, Singh foregrounds subjective memory, emotional experience, bodily suffering, and ordinary lives often excluded from official historical narratives. Delhi emerges as a fractured urban space where civilization and brutality, spirituality and corruption, continuity and destruction coexist within constant tension.

At the same time, the novel reveals the cyclical nature of violence embedded within the historical consciousness of the city. Invasions, communal riots, Partition trauma, and political oppression recur across centuries, transforming Delhi into a haunted landscape where the past continually intrudes upon the present. Through monuments, ruins, bodies, and memory, the city preserves histories that dominant narratives attempt to suppress.

Bhagmati's symbolic relationship with Delhi further deepens the novel's critique of rigid structures of identity and power. Through marginalized figures such as Bhagmati, refugees, laborers, and ordinary citizens, Singh democratizes historical discourse and redefines history as a lived human experience rather than a record of imperial achievement alone. Ultimately, Delhi: A Novel offers a profound exploration of the relationship between history, memory, violence, and human endurance in postcolonial India. Singh transforms Delhi into a polyphonic historical archive where competing identities, suppressed memories, and human contradictions coexist within constant tension. The city becomes both witness and participant in history, carrying within itself the scars of destruction while continuing to survive through resilience and continuity.

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