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### Delhi Is Still Far Away: A Study of Drifting Dreams in Ruskin Bond's *Delhi Is Not Far*

#### Abstract

The sarcastic usage 'Delhi is still far away'—still used in our daily lives—has been used in different context in Ruskin Bond's *Delhi is Not Far* (a novella). Here, Delhi metaphorically stands for 'destination', which is aimed to be accomplished by Deep Chand, Pitamber, Goonga, and Aziz living in Pipalnagar, an imaginary city located somewhere in North India. They plan to explore their respective business in Delhi but no one succeeds in carrying out their dream by the end of the novella. Like them, Arun, an emotional gentleman having good knowledge of Delhi, also fails to get fulfilled his desire of becoming a well-recognized detective novelist in Urdu due to his lack of perfection in writing and the unhelpful hands of publishers. Arun, despite such failure, does not lose his hope but remains

very optimistic of writing a bestselling novel in near future. The paper primarily attempts to reveal as to why these characters have failed to achieve their respective dreams, despite of the fact that they don't have any big dream. Besides their aspirations, the paper also seeks to explore as to how and where these disadvantaged people of Pipalnagar live in. Despite such failure, hope somewhere remains a waking dream for the characters by the end of the novella.

Key Words: Delhi, destination, dreams, failure, hope

*Hold fast to dreams,*

*For if dreams die*

*Life is a broken-winged bird,*

*That cannot fly*

Langston Hughes

The sarcastic usage 'Delhi is still far away'—still used in our daily lives—has its historical extraction to Sultan Ghiyas-Ud-Din Tughlaq, the founding father of Tughlaq Dynasty and Hazrat Nizamuddin, a Great Sufi Saint. The secular saint had a good habit of arranging food for poor people, though he himself used to take an inadequate amount of food — only bread and water— for his daily life. The King Tughlaq became very annoyed and furious with the sage for some ideological differences advanced to personal conflict. Hence, King Tughlaq once sent a strong message to Hazrat Nizamuddin asking him to leave Delhi before his arrival from the expedition of Bengal otherwise he would be punished. Nizamuddin's devout followers became tremendously worried for such pronouncement and the tension further started mounting among them as King Tughlaq began his journey back from Bengal to Delhi. But Nizamuddin, a very cool and calm saint, without being worried just replied *Hunooz Dilli Door Ast* (Delhi Is Still Far Away). It happened truly as King Tughlaq died in an accident on the outskirts of Delhi before his arrival. It happened, as

assumed, due to the curse of Hazrat Nizamuddin, but the famous Farsi phrase has been used in different context in Ruskin Bond's novella *Delhi is Not Far*. When a publisher asks Arun – protagonist of the novella – about the status and progress of his writing, he promptly replies with the saying—Delhi is still far. 'Delhi Is Still Far' or 'Delhi Is Still Far Away' has its paradoxical as well as literal meaning in the novella; he is firmly working on it but it will take more time to become an admired writer. He knows that he has to go miles before the sleep (death) to get his dream fulfilled in the field of writing. For Arun, "it would be a good idea to write a book about Delhi – its cities and kings, poets and musicians" (Bond 420).

What is Delhi? "The world is the body and Delhi its life" (quoted in Mathur 184). In *Delhi Is Not Far*, the most of the characters like Deep Chand, Pitamber, Goonga, and Aziz dream of their individual expedition from Pipalnagar, an imaginary city located somewhere in North India, to Delhi. Here, Delhi metaphorically stands for character's 'destination' which they aim to accomplish. As to achieve it, they plan to explore their respective business opportunities in Delhi but they fail in carrying them out, although they do not have any big dream rather have very small dreams like opening barbershop, junk shop, and tea stall etc. They, except Arun, have never visited the city. They sometimes flow to the unseen city with the wings of imagination. So, they don't find their existence worthwhile without Delhi. Thus, Delhi not only stands for 'a place of far destination' with 'full of opportunities yet to be achieved' but also stands for a land of 'unseen-nostalgia'.

Arun, an emotional gentleman having good knowledge of Delhi, also struggles to get fulfilled his desire of becoming a well-recognized detective novelist in Urdu. 'Delhi', a symbol of far destination, further stands for 'literary writing' which he tries to achieve but ultimately fails to triumph over it. He writhes to become a chartbuster-detective Urdu novelist, starts his career with small publishers paying him a meager amount. His writings are successfully sold, although his personal accomplishments in the field of writing are few and

none of his Urdu thrillers like *Khoon* (Blood) and *Jasoosi* (Detective) have left any valuable footprint in the minds of the readers. Despite being an expert of Urdu, Hindi, and English language, Arun is continuously rejected and shamelessly exploited by his publishers. India, according to him, "...is a good country for publishers but not for writers" (Bond 356). Furthermore, he is tried to be demoralized by the publishers who advise him to write guidebooks—would be sold like hot cakes—for college students but he denies such money making suggestive path. Ethically, it does not sound good that students are much dependable on guide books but this is the harsh reality of India education system. He, unlike guide book writers, should prefer "...spilling the blood of fictitious prostitutes to spoon-feeding the brains of misguided students" (Bond 356) through his writings. Such dampened suggestion does not thwart him from the dream of becoming a renowned writer rather he tries his best to conquer all impenetrability. He, without losing hope, sticks himself to the writing of, at least, cheap thrillers because he dreams of becoming a bestseller novelist in near future. He also believes that his writing one day will bring him both fame and money. He may be "made weak by time and fate, but [he is] strong in will" (Alfred Tennyson "Ulysses") and his main motto is "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (Alfred Tennyson "Ulysses").

Arun does not waste his time in any reckless or useless activity which may hamper the process of his writing. Moreover, he has very less interest in marriage though he has a yielding corner for Kamla. He sometimes visits the master massager Deep Chand to flush out his mental stress for better writing. Deep also sometimes props up and inspires Arun in his writing: it appears to be a dull when Arun kills three people in a chapter in his latest book. Deep inspires him and suggests "Well, finish it soon,'.... 'Then you can clear your debts, when you have paid your debts you will leave Pipalnagar, won't you?'" (Bond 359).

Before his entry in the field of writing, Arun spent his time in some other small activities which can only be provided by the small and dusty town like Pipalnagar. Earlier, he

had opened a tea-shop and then tried to become a palm reader but failed miserably in both these professions. Later he invested his efforts in a number of other professions like pick-pocketing under the guidance of a friend who practiced "...his craft at various railway stations and made a good living from it" (Bond 356), but Arun had to leave this ill-practice too. He had also opened a vegetable stall but it ran only for three days. Ruskin Bond himself has also sold vegetables in his real life. So, Arun, an alter ego of Ruskin Bond, "...may encounter many defeats, but [he] must not be defeated. In fact, it may be necessary to encounter the defeats, so [he] can know who [he is], what [he] can rise from, how [he] can still come out of it" ("An Interview with Maya Angelou" 2009).

Arun, unlike his homeless orphan friend Suraj, defines Delhi as the only place which can change his life. Like other characters, Arun also has a very mundane life in Pipalnar, doesn't find any difference in day and night there. It appears to be a monotonous one with full of uncountable difficulties.

In Pipalnar there is not exactly despair, but resignation, an indifference to both living and dying. The town is almost truly reflected in the Pipalnar Home, wherein an open courtyard surrounded by mud walls a score of, mental patients wonder about, listless and bored. A man jabbars excitedly, but most of the inmates are quiet, sad and resentful—resentful because we do not try to understand their beautiful insane world (Bond 363).

Arun who always yearns for an escape-route from Pipalnar uses to go on an excursion with Suraj by hiring a bicycle in order to escape the dull life of Pipalnar: "It was then that I made the amazing discovery that by exerting my legs a little, I could get out of Pipalnar, and that, except for the cycle-hire, it did not involve any expense or great sacrifice" (Bond 388). While the optimist Arun foresees his success only in Delhi and loves to wander around it, Suraj loves to wander around Pipalnar. Although Suraj is pessimistic about himself but he is very optimistic on the subject of Arun's success as a writer. Suraj unconditionally

supports his enthrallment for Delhi always treats him as his own brother. They are the good examples of eternal friendship debunking any kind of socio-political barriers from their life. Whenever Arun needs money for his trip to Delhi, he is unconditionally helped and supported by Suraj. Arun saves money from his small earnings, mainly from occasional erratic payments money-ordered by his publishers. On one occasion, Arun asks Suraj-

“Should I go to Delhi, Suraj?”

‘Why not? You are always talking about it. You should go’

‘I would like you to come with me. Perhaps that can make you better there, even cure you of your fits.’

‘Not now. After my examinations.’

‘Then I will wait...’

‘Go now, if there is a chance of making a living in Delhi.’

‘There is nothing definite. But I know the chance will not come until I leave this place and make my chances. There are one or two editors who have asked me to look them up. They could give me some work. And if I find an honest publisher I might be encouraged to write an honest book.’

‘Write the book, even if you don’t find a publisher.’

‘I will try.’” (Bond 382)

Once, when Arun was called for an interview in Delhi for the post of literary Urdu editor, he had no shirt to wear. “The few [he] possessed were either torn at the shoulders or frayed at the collars” (416) but he did not want to show his poverty to the editor. So, he had to go to Deep Chand and Pitamber for a better shirt which was finally managed by Kamla, his well-wisher. For the interview, he made his journey for Delhi as “...six hours later the bus crossed the swollen river Yamuna, passed under the grant red walls of the fort built by Shahjahan, and entered the old city of Delhi” (Bond 417). “It is strange to be in a city again,

after so many years of Pipalnagar” (Bond 419). He travelled all over Delhi and realized how the city’s places have risen and fallen except Chandni Chawk. He was really enthralled by Delhi and its environment, especially by the beauty of Chandni Chawk, the heart of Delhi, although it had old buildings, landmarks, torturous and mysterious lanes and alleys. “Chandni Chawk has not changed in character even if its face has a different look” (Bond 420). Chandni Chawk predominated by cloth merchants and sweet eats-sellers was “...as busy as on any market-day and the competition louder and more fierce” (Bond 420). He also walked down the Dariba, a famed street of the Silversmiths, while Jama Masjid was surrounded by bicycle shops, junk shops, fish shops, bird shops, and goat selling shops etc. The statue of Queen Victoria streak with white pigeons caught his attention. Arun “...walked the streets all the day, wandering through the bazaars, down the wide shady roads of the capital, resting under the *jamun* trees near Humayun’s tomb...” (Bond 420). Arun who likes the sounds of the street, the cries of vendors, Tonga drivers, and the rattle of the tram made a move all over Delhi city.

Delhi itself has its unity in diversity; “There is a richness of race, though the Punjabi predominates—in shops, taxis, motor workshops, and carpenters' sheds. But in the old city, there are still many Muslims following traditional trades—backers, butchers, painters, makers of toys and kites. South Indian have filled our offices; Rajashthanis move desteriously along the scaffolding of new buildings springing up everywhere; and in the surrounding countryside nomadic Gujjars still graze their cattle, while settled villagers find their lands selected for trails of new tube wells, pumps, fertilizers and ploughs” (Bond 421).

Deep Chand, Pitamber, Ramu, and Aziz plan to visit and open different shops in Delhi in order to make money for better life in future. In addition, they want to skip the humdrum and boring life leading in Pipalnagar. Deep Chand, a barber, dreams of opening a barber shop in Delhi, while intelligence Ramu, a sweet little boy with much good nature, has a hundred-and-

one different dreams about beautiful women. Deep Chand, who is "...a short, thick-set man, very compact, dark and smooth-skinned from his waist upwards" (Bond 358), is a perpetual cater of *paan* along with cloves and cardamoms. "In the next chair, the sweetmeat-seller is having the hair shaved from under his great flabby arm-pits; he is looked after by Deep Chand's younger brother, Ramu, who is deputed to attend to the less popular customers" (Bond 358). Deep, an extremely virile man is too attractive to women having a mass of soft black hair from his hips to his ankles. Deep, an expert in hair cutting uses his brush and razor like an artist during the shaving of his customers. No one can give "...a better massage than Deep Chand. Had his income been greater, he could have shifted his trade to another locality [like Delhi]" (Bond 359). He has a plan to shift his shop from Pipalnagar to Delhi in order to earn more money which would bring him a decent living. Here, in the Mohalla of Pipalnagar, he has failed to find rich and good customers. His principle customers are labourers from the railway stations, shopkeepers, and truck drivers. Deep is a very honest and fair businessman who charges only meager amount of two rupees, while it is three rupees in other places. During a rainy season, it became impossible for him to run his barbershop for it was fully swamped. "Deep Chand, Ramu, and a customer were using buckets to bail the water out of their premises" (Bond 407).

The rain came suddenly and took every corner by surprise. In a few seconds, people were drenched to the skin, and within ten minutes the Mohalla was completely flooded. The temple tank overflowed, the railway lines disappeared, and the old wall near the bus stop shivered and fell silently, the noise of the collapse drowned by the rain (Bond 407).

In Pipalnagar excessive rain not only destroys shops but also damages the roads flooded with water while drinking water also becomes contaminated. The people of Pipalnagar sometimes become very impatient for monsoon but when it goes beyond the limit in the name of the

flood, they start cursing the monsoon and pray for its speedy retreat. In a nutshell, the weather of Pipalnagar is very impulsive and incongruous for human life.

Deep Chand becomes very happy when he comes to know that Arun is leaving Pipalnagar for Delhi because Deep has a dream of opening a barbershop there with the help of Arun. Deep does not dream to become a millionaire, he just wishes for less-mundane life than Pipalnagar in Delhi. Before leaving Pipalnagar, Arun goes for a shaving for last time in Deep's saloon but Deep does not charge him any money, while Arun promises to write him back as soon as he would settle down in Delhi. Deep realizes that Delhi is a place where sufficient money can be made by hair cutting. Deep is "...dreaming of electric razors and a plush hair-cutting saloon in the capital [Delhi], with the Prime Minister as his client" (Bond 390). Besides a barbershop for men, he also plans to keep a special saloon for ladies because "...girls are [nowadays] beginning to keep short hair" (Bond 424). The ladies saloon would be attended by his brother Ramu because "women feel safe with him, he looks so pretty and innocent" (Bond 424).

Aziz, a Muslim boy of eighteen years old, also has great fascination for Delhi. He has a junk shop with mud walls and tin roof in Pipalnagar and has failed to get his life changed with it. He lives in a small room behind the junk shop, does not want to change his job rather he wants to change the location of his job from Pipalnagar to Delhi in order to earn sufficient money. The condition of his junk shop is not in a good condition as its wall can be washed away any time during the monsoon and the roof can be damaged during a dust-storm. "The rain comes in, anyway, and the floor awash most of the time" (Bond 364). Despite being a young boy of eighteen, he has started collecting "dust and age and disease" (Bond 364). It seems that he has become aged before his age. "Even though there is nothing for him to be optimistic about" (Bond 364), he dreams of opening a more up-to-date junk shop near

Chandni Chowk of Delhi. Due to such reason, Aziz always maintains good relationship with Arun and asks him about his progress of staying in Delhi,

He is always asking me when I intend keeping my vow of going to Delhi to make my fortune.

I am to keep an eye out for a favourable shop-site near Chandni Chawk where he can open a more up-to-date junk shop. He is saving towards this end; but what he saves trickles away in paying of his wife's upkeep at the Home. (Bond 364)

Besides Arun, Chand, and Aziz, there is another character who dreams of Delhi is no other than Goonga, a dumb tea shop-keeper and popular storyteller. Goonga, a thick-set youth with shave head, also plans of opening a tea shop in Delhi but he also fails to get his dream fulfilled like the others. Despite being a poor tea-maker, he has not given up his dream of opening a tea-shop in Delhi. He does not mind the customers who make fun of him and clout him over the head rather he makes faces to them, and chuckles at them derisively at their remarks. "He could say one word, 'Goo', and he says it often. This kept the customers in fits of laughter" (Bond 377). On one occasion, "someone got up from the bench and, with the flat of his hand, whacked the Goonga over his bald head. The Goonga sprang at the man making queer noises in his throat, and then someone tripped him and sent him sprawling on the ground. There was more laughter" (Bond 377).

Pitamber, a kho-kho champion and wrestler, also plans to own a scooter-rickshaw instead of cycle-rickshaw as it involves no physical exertion and will bring him more money in Delhi. He belongs to a village five miles away from Pipalnagar. "One day he made [Arun] sit in his rickshaw, and [they] cycled out of the town, along the road to Delhi; then [they] had to get down and push the rickshaw over a rutted cart-track, until [they] reached [Pitamber's] village" (Bond 388). In Pitamber's village, Arun finds that "all the boys [are] long-limbed and sun-browned, erect and at the same time relaxed. There is a sense of vitality and confidence in Pitamber's village, which [he has] not seen in Pipalnagar" (Bond 363). Pitamber who has a

wife and three children in his village owns a few acres of lands on which maize and sugar cane are being produced. Even if, he spends most of his time in such agricultural activity, he may not earn sufficient money for his family. Despite such meager income, hope remains a waking dream for him.

In this context, we can also talk about a female character named Kamla, a very small and delicate twenty three year old prostitute. Like Arun, Deep Chand, Aziz, Goonga and Pitamber, Kamla only cannot dream of such journey because she is a woman and she has no pertinent man on whom she can have faith, although she is loved by Arun. Kamla does not even dare to dream of moving to Delhi, tries to find her solace only in the lap of Pipalnagar, because she lives in an orthodox society fully governed by men. In such patriarchal society, she is treated only as an object of sexual gratification by Seth Govind Ram. She feels loneliness despite her husband's presence in her life. She has her husband, but he does not own her rather Seth Govind Ram owns her. In her words,

I have no family, silly man! I have a husband who is happy only if I can make myself attractive to others. He is skinny and smells of garlic, and he has given my father five acres of land for the favour of having a wife half his age. But it is Seth Govind Ram who really owns me; my husband is only his servant. (Bond 375)

At the end, it seems to echo a remark once made by Plato; "human behavior flows through three main sources: desire, emotion and knowledge" (quoted in Gramma and Paladi 6). Arun, an emotional gentleman, has good knowledge of Delhi but has failed to get fulfilled his *desire* of becoming a well-recognized detective novelist due to his lack of perfection in writing and the unhelpful hands of publishers. Deep Chand, Goonga, Pitamber, and Aziz are emotional fellows and have desire for Delhi, but have failed to get accomplished their dreams due to their lack of knowledge of Delhi. Furthermore, they fail to achieve their goals due to their much enslavement on Arun. It is disheartening to see that all the characters have failed

to materialize their dream. Conclusively, hopelessness seems to envelope the world of the characters as they fail to gain something meaningful in the journey of life.

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