

The Spectacle of Death and Deception: Analysing Fictional and Non-Fictional Writings on the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

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Abstract

The act of remembrance and memory-making becomes significant in the discourse regarding watershed events of a nation. The role of memory in recounting historical experiences acts as an interface that specifically underlines the 'horror', psychologically more potent than 'terror', of an event in the cultural consciousness of a society. The representation of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre gives rise to questions related to historiography in regard to a binary privileging of narratives that are bifurcated into two distinguishing strands of dominant discourse and marginalized narratives. We are forced to contemplate our national history where Gandhi referred to the Rowlatt Satyagraha as a "Himalayan Miscalculation" or should we take pride in the fact that Tagore had relinquished his Knighthood in retaliation to the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre? In consideration of the binary privileging of hegemonic discourse, this paper will bring the marginalized experiences into the mainstream dialogue. Thus, through my paper, I would like to analyse selected texts in English and bhasha languages that highlight personal and alternative accounts of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. These texts will help us to understand the act of representation that brings our attention to the way memory itself is perceived and given relevance to as a framework of the national history and a marker of identity.

Keywords: Memory, Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, Marginalization, Identity, Nation

Historical Context

James Joyce writes in *Ulysses* that "[h]istory... is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (Joyce, 60) and makes us think that while analysing history which episteme are we essentially subscribing to? The primary and also the most crucial question which comes up is what happened during the time this history was being written? What are the circumstances that lead to that particular moment of history and what are the ways in which it is being represented as we perceive it today? The important thing to realise and understand here is by asking these questions we are restricting history to an event that is being represented in a particular way. For the majority of the people, the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre is just an event in history that took place on 13th April 1919. The curriculum in school

makes the students memorise the date on which General Dyer opened fire on the thousands of people who had gathered in the bagh (lawn) of Jallianwala or how many deaths occurred on that day, but only a few actually look into the depths of the circumstances that lead to the infamous incident and what happened afterward. When talking about the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre and the memories we have of it today, it is important to start by talking about the context which led to the situation that the people of India found themselves in which was the First World War. When Britain declared war on 4th August 1914, Lord Charles Hardinge, the then Viceroy of India, declared that India too would be partaking in their war, without even consulting the Indian political leaders. Though the news of the outbreak of war was welcomed by the Indian leaders and a widespread proclamation of loyalty was pledged. The *Tribune* read “[o]n the question of loyalty to the British Government, all people are united”. *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* reported “spontaneous expressions of loyalty...throughout the length and breadth of the Indian Empire”. On 29th April 1918, Mahatma Gandhi wrote to Lord Charles Hardinge that “I would make them withdraw all the Congress resolutions, and not whisper ‘Home Rule’ or ‘Responsible Government’... I write this, because I love the English Nation, and I wish to evoke in every Indian the loyalty of the Englishman”.

Considered to be the ‘martial race’, the bulk that formed the Indian Army came from Punjab. The majority of these men were illiterate and belonged to a colonised land, these people were poor and marginalised. Owing to the lack of literacy and awareness, these people were not able to record their experiences to find a place in the larger history. Their stories and experiences were carried forward in the form of oral narratives which is not considered to be a credible source of history as compared to the pedagogical, written accounts. There were stories of gallantry, of sacrifices, of these brave men who received greater lands and higher pensions. Along with these narratives, there are also narratives that are consciously ignored. These are the narratives of losses of human lives and material resources which were exploited during the time of war. The differences in narratives acquire a sharper critique when the Armistice was declared on 11th November 1918 after the First World War was officially over and the soldiers returned home. Instead of acknowledging the efforts of the Indian soldiers, the Imperial Government passed ‘The Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Bill’, on 6th February 1919, popularly known as the Rowlatt Bill (named after Justice Sir Sidney Rowlatt) in two parts before the Imperial Legislature in Delhi. It was earlier introduced in December 1918 and was meant to indefinitely extend the emergency measures that were put in place through the Defence of India Act 1915 during the First World War. On 18th March 1919, the Rowlatt Act was passed by the Imperial Legislative Council in Delhi and two days later it became a law, authorising the government to arrest any Indian without a warrant and confine suspects without trial for up to one year. This resulted in a widespread hartal called by Mahatma Gandhi on 30th March 1919, postponed to 6th April, and protests led by Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal against the British Government. It was against the arrest of the two latter leaders that people had gathered to protest in the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar when General Dyer ordered his troops to open fire at the people killing hundreds of them.

When we talk about that day, the discussion is restricted to the number of deaths that took place which is converted into facts, figures, and data. Thus, a very pertinent question emerges regarding the relationship between history and memory, and the role of memory in the making of history. Most importantly what episteme of history are we subscribing to when we discuss such historic events? We must question the victimization of Dr. Kichlu and Dr. Satyapal along with the larger Indian population

at the hands of colonial authority. It is also noteworthy that those same people at power who brutalized the colonized people were rewarded for their act of loyalty to the crown. Do we subscribe to our national history where Gandhi referred to the Rowlatt Satyagraha as a “Himalayan Miscalculation” or should we take pride in the fact that Tagore had relinquished his Knighthood in retaliation to the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre? The Rowlatt Act and the tragic incident of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre exposed the decision of aiding the British in the war, a complete failure and eventually, ruled out of the national history. The contributions of the war-returning soldiers were further scrutinised due to the fact that these were the very men who obeyed the orders of General Dyer during the Amritsar Massacre. General Dyer’s troops included twenty-five Gorkhas and twenty-five Baluchis who were raised in the 9th Gorkha Rifles and 59 Scinde Rifles, respectively. It is, at once, debasing and infuriating that the Government of Independent India took no measures to disband the two battalions from the armed forces that committed the diabolical act against their own countrymen.

Quivering Voices, Rising Rebellion

When we talk about the history of the Indian partition, the conventional, pedagogical narrative follows a particular structure whereas the alternative narratives help in resisting hegemonic discourses. That is to say that it follows a particular structure where the events of history have dynamic relationships to the past, the present, and the fate of future regimes. It also becomes a source of a public debate when there are differences in narratives between the history tellers. The debates become stronger if we consider the differences in narratives of Britain to that of the narratives of the people they had colonised. Thus, those who are in power have the power to write their own versions of history or at least, curtail them according to their advantage. Subaltern history found a wider audience in Indian writing due to recent scholarship. Indian writers have endeavoured to uncover historical and socio-political realities that have been suppressed or disregarded. These voices express conflicts, exploitation, discrimination, and oppression. Indian literature related to the Amritsar Massacre brings forth the experiences of the people in the margins that had only existed through oral histories and in memories for so long. The *Tribune* published a newspaper article on 21st November 1919 where General Dyer was asked about the atrocities he brought over the people of Amritsar in the name of the regime of Martial Law. He cited the reason of Ms. Marcella Sherwood, an English lady who was harassed by a group of people protesting the Rowlatt Act. The incident took place in Gali Kauriyan which is popularly known as the Crawling Lane. In response to this assault, General Dyer claimed that Britain saw its women as sacred. As a result, he felt the street should be looked upon as sacred and declared that no Indian shall pass along the lane, and if they have to pass, they must do so on all fours. It was not his intention to ask innocent men to crawl over the place. He merely wanted to keep the street sacred. He further went on to emphasise that he was just carrying out his duty against the people in Amritsar who rose in protest against the Government.

Fearing a déjà vu of the Revolt of 1857, he stated that in order to maintain law and decorum he would not refrain from using violence. He wanted the shops to be opened which were closed because of the hartal. He claimed that “if you [Indians] wish for war, the Government is prepared for war. And if you want peace, then obey my orders and open all your shops, else I will shoot.” Stanley Wolpert in his novel, *Massacre at Jallianwala Bagh* (1988), depicts a session of inquiry between Lord William Hunter and General Dyer, where Lord Hunter asks the general about what led him to take such measures

against these people. The latter replied that he merely felt that his orders had not been obeyed. He felt that the Martial Law was flouted and that it was his responsibility to immediately disperse the crowd with rifle fire. He claimed that “my mind was made up as I came along in my motor car... I thought it my duty to go on firing until it dispersed. If I fired a little, the effect would not be sufficient. If I had fired a little, I should be wrong in firing at all.” General Dyer was not only hailed as a hero but he also received a hefty sum of twenty-six thousand pounds through a fundraising by Britishers who believed he had civilized the savages in India.

There also happens to be a discourse of history writing which focuses on the idea of building a nation. When India gained its independence on 15th August 1947, it became very important for the nation to have its own history that it could portray in front of the world, especially, its people. It became very important that the people in India took pride in being an Indian and the idea of nation-building or creating a national identity became very significant. Salman Rushdie writes in *Midnight's Children* (1981) that “[a] nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream” (Rushdie, 129-130). This depicts that India as a country had found its voice and could write its own history. In such societies, history is guided by the morality of the nation itself which seeks to justify the efforts and actions that had been taken in order to give itself an identity. History seeks to praise the nation through a particular version of its past and becomes a document of exclusion when it is met with a counter-narrative that attempts to reveal a much darker truth. On one hand, where the struggle for freedom is celebrated and revealed as a part of national history and the entire nation takes pride in it, at the same time the fact that these national leaders were themselves in favour of the First World War with the intention of attaining Home-Rule at the end of it was carefully removed from the public memory. Mahatma Gandhi himself realised his Rowlatt Satyagraha was a “Himalayan Miscalculation” as he felt the nation was not adequately prepared for it. Hence, it becomes vital for us readers to decide which episteme of history we choose to believe in. This, in no way, means that the nationalistic narrative of freedom struggle is not true or the facts are flawed but what this paper wants to foreground is that one can never generalise the experiences of all people into a linear homogeneous narrative to depict the history and to add to the idea of nation-building. Consequently, when Gandhi was addressing the people of India to participate in widespread hartals and fasts, he was only representing one India out of the many Indias. There are as many narratives of India as there are Indians.

Literary Representations

Mohammad Tufail is also known as Thaila Kanjar was a brave man as portrayed by Sa’adat Hasan Manto in his short story titled “It Happened in 1919”. When the crowd protesting against the banishment of Dr. Satyapal and Dr. Kitchlew were dispersed by the violent British forces, it was Thaila who tells the protestors “don’t waste your energies ... follow me ... Let’s kill those white men who injured and murdered innocent people ... I swear to God that together we can wring their necks” (Manto, 18). Not afraid of the bullets, he led the crowd with slogans to the mouth of the bridge where the British Army was mounted. No sooner did he try reaching out for one of them, than his body was

riddled with bullets. This sacrifice was considered as an act of heroism and enraged the Indian crowd even more as they prepared themselves for larger protests. At the same time, there is a narrative of Ratan Devi as described by Bisham Sahni in his play, "Colour My Robe Saffron" (1996), where she has nothing to do with the protests or hartals. She is shown in a festive mood, wearing colourful clothes and dressing up to enjoy the fair. But soon she is interrupted by the sounds of gunfire and receives the news of her husband's death in the Jallianwala Bagh. She rushes to the bagh during the curfew hours to find her dead husband. She calls out for help but finds nobody except for dogs and jackals who had gathered around the place attracted by the smell of blood. This is where we see the helplessness of a woman spending the entire night on the corpse-filled lawn fending off dogs and jackals with sticks to safeguard her husband's dead body.

When we talk about narratives of our nationalistic identity, we do so at the cost of suppressing or even ignoring certain other narratives. Hegemonic nationalism that is discussed is constructed as the single homogenous truth about what constitutes national identity and experiences. Nationalism or narratives of the nation is defined by the political power where the author of the history claims the authority to speak on behalf of the entire nation. It is important to realise that the voice which claims to represent the entire nation is essentially patriarchal. Nationalism which has been depicted as history is constituted of issues raised and constructed from a masculine 'public' sphere. Women, on the other hand, are relegated to a domestic sphere where their narratives related to the nation are constructed as an indirect relationship that is narrated through men. This private sphere has little or no impact on the public space in which nationalism defines itself. History has always defined India as a motherland. Throughout the course of colonial rule, the oppressed nation had always been equated to that of a figure of a woman who needed protection. Therefore, tales of brave men who were prepared to lay down their lives to protect their motherland have been popularized and there was a conscious removal of narratives that did not comply with the homogenous narrative of nation-building. In his novel *The Weary Generations* (1963), Abdullah Hussein talks about Ms. Marcella Sherwood, whom General Dyer had referred to in his defense against his remorseless regulations in Amritsar. Hussain's protagonist is a hunch-backed old fisherman who is a witness to the atrocities afflicted upon the Indian masses in the name of patriotism. He claimed that "nine [English] men were killed that day, although I only saw seven with my own eyes" (Hussain, 127). He further claimed that he was a witness to the shrieks of a white English woman when groups of men isolated her on the streets and stripped her down: "There were fifteen or twenty men piled on top of her. They were beating her with their fists", and when they stopped, "they looked at the naked woman lying on the ground and ran away from view into the side streets" (Hussain, 134). Amidst the turmoil of the freedom struggle, the voice of this English lady has consciously been erased while narrating the tales of the history of the nation. This uncovers ugly facts regarding Indian historical writing that is deeply embroiled in civil controversies, international debates, and archival discrepancies.

Similarly, Sa'adat Hasan Manto in his short story, "It Happened in 1919, refers to the sisters of Thaila, Shamshad, and Almas, who were forced to regularly visit the English Lords as prostitutes after his death. They were to be sent to these lords so that they could take adequate revenge for the assault on Miss Sherwood. Standing stark naked before the English officers they claimed they were Thaila's sisters who had been riddled with bullets for his misplaced patriotism. Manto follows a stereotypical nationalistic narrative to demonstrate the moralistic tradition of the nation where these women claimed

to be “his beautiful sisters ... Come, pierce our perfumed bodies with the hot irons of your lust ... But before you do that, let us spit on your faces once” ([Manto](#), 21). Manto further builds towards a stereotypical climax where the narrator claims that after the ladies express their hatred towards the British Officers, they are shot but then goes on to take a subtle dig at the kind of the narratives that make history. He distinguishes between the kind of history that can be told and the history which has to be carefully removed through his narrator who later goes on to admit with anguish in his voice that “[t]hat they blackened the name of their martyred brother” ([Manto](#), 21). This just further substantiates the difference between the two narratives. One can talk about the bravery and sacrifices of one’s life but the stories of these women who rose in rebellion against the wills of colonial power in their own ways can never be talked about since they do not conform to the ways national history is written.

Conclusion

Contemporary Indian English writing has sought postcolonial historiography that has helped in edging Indian history from the margins to the center of international interest. The Western Intelligentsia has offered a few fickle admirations to a handful of Indian notables such as Nehru, Gandhi, and Tagore, whilst expressing complete apathy to a large number of socially inferior groups of Indians. Indian historical writing has cast off the abject depiction of arcane lore and represented the lived reality of the general population. It is also noteworthy that popular works of fiction on the Amritsar Massacre are originally written in the Urdu language. This geographic location of Punjab and the diverse ethnography resulted in the diverse semantics that adds more layers to the memory of this gruesome event. Even after the Partition, people on both sides of the politically-created border reminisced on the fateful day which emerged as a binding event for the two newly-formed nations. This paper hopes to raise more questions regarding the discrepancies in personal memory and official records, and the nation’s ability to critique its own flaws and impairments.

When we talk about a particular event be it the Holocaust, the First World War, or the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, these are not just public events but also personal trauma. What the public memory does is collectivise personal trauma and lay it down as a linear pedagogical narrative for the citizens to read, hear, and consume but there is a loss of one’s personal account. The major problem with using the personal narratives and perspectives of novels is that these are not factual and thus are not the right materials to write history. But these are responses and readings of historical experiences. One is reading this history from a very personal location. What personal history does and acknowledges is one’s location in the personal and the public. When one says that they have faced, experienced, and witnessed a particularly traumatic incident, they have experienced it in a subjective manner that may or may not conform to the larger hegemonic narrative. The writings of Manto, for instance, who had witnessed the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre as a child are not just powerful but also very individualistic. Therefore, the specificities which are lost in public narratives are put forward in his stories. This is also very important because it becomes a way to scrutinise public history. We can look at the inconsistencies, gaps, and assumptions that have been made while writing this public history. Subsequently, there is this requirement for a certain kind of co-existence. There is a strong sense of assumption that when we are talking about personal narratives, we are talking about the common people. In all these novels or short stories, it is the common people who are the protagonists, but these are people who are considered to be passive when compared to the grand scheme of things. These are people who fall victims and are

the ones who have been wronged, but one needs to realise that these are also the people who have their own agency and are contributing to the making of history.

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