

Representation of Women in the Turbulent Punjab of 1970s to 90s:

Interpreting Jaspreet Singh's *Helium*

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Abstract

The present research proposal aims at analysing the representation of women in Jaspreet Singh's *Helium* which is based on the anti-Sikh violence of 1984. The paper attempts a New Historicist reading of the text. It interrogates the reasons behind calling the massacre "gendercide". It investigates the portrayal of women in the light of several reports on the violence. It examines the factors responsible for the absence of books focused on the suffering of women during the violence. The fictional narrative will be analysed for explaining this silencing of history. *Helium* portrays the pain of the survivors as well as the guilt of the accused. It is a heartrending narrative of the suffering of Nelly Kaur who lost her entire family due to the massacre and the guilt experienced by Raj Kumar for his father's involvement in the violence.

Keywords: Representation, Women, Jaspreet Singh, anti-Sikh, violence

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The study is an attempt to understand the representation of women in fiction which is set in the turbulent Punjab of 1970s to 90s. Punjab went through significant upheavals during the said period. Operation Bluestar in 1984 led to the killing of thousands of innocent and helpless devotees. The assassination of Indira Gandhi by her own Sikh bodyguards was followed by a heinous massacre of Sikhs throughout the country, especially in Delhi. The incident also bred discord between Hindus and Sikhs who lived in perfect harmony before. The perpetrators of violence used Hindus to kill their Sikh brothers. One of the several reports on the anti-Sikh violence states:

The first official estimate of casualties in Delhi was of only 325 killed (including 46 Hindus). The Hindustan Times reported these numbers on November 11, 1984. However, three years later, the official death toll was said to be 2,733, leaving over 1,300 widows and 4,000 orphans. Besides, more than 50,000 Sikhs also left Delhi after the pogrom. (Baixas 5)

The *Encyclopedia of Genocide* discusses this massacre of Sikhs as "Genocide of Sikhs" (Kopf 516). Sikh men were the target of the crazed mobs. The mobs dragged them out of their homes, cut their hair and beard, killed them or burnt them alive in front of the shocked and helpless families. This continued till Sikh settlements were turned into piles of dead bodies with women and children wailing over them. Due to such reasons, this has also been called gendercide. Mary Anne Warren in her 1985 book, *Gendercide: The Implications of Sex Selection* defined the term gendercide. "Citing the Oxford English Dictionary definition of genocide as "the deliberate extermination of a race of people," Warren wrote: by analogy, "gendercide would be the deliberate extermination of persons of a particular sex (or gender)" (22).

The police used the situation to their advantage by illegally detaining and torturing Sikhs. They would kill them in fake encounters for the sake of promotions. This led Sikh men to join

the separatists and they left homes with the mission of bringing justice to their community. The authorities then started targeting women. They tortured them physically as well as mentally and used them as tools to force the men to court arrest. Balpreet Singh talks about the atrocities on Sikh women in his article “Unheard: Atrocities on Sikh Women in Punjab”. The shameful practice of “shudhee karan” i.e. rape was used to “purify” the community. Men were compelled to watch the women of their families being raped. One such victim was Amandeep Kaur of Rampura Phul who was the sister of one of the members of Khalistan Commando Force. She was arrested along with her husband and father on the day of her wedding. She was sexually assaulted at the police station in order to seek revenge of the murder of SSP’s son. Their house was set on fire and her sister as well as mother was brought to the police station for similar torture. This continued for several months after which she was shot dead by the police (B. Singh 2).

Another heart-rending story is that of Gurmeet Kaur and Gurdev Kaur, wives of Mehal Singh Babbar and Kulwant Singh Babbar respectively. They were forcibly arrested by the police. After hitting Gurdev Kaur with a rod, the SSP:

...next moved to Bibi Gurmeet Kaur whom he threw to the ground and began to kick in the chest. The next torture to begin was the “ghotna” where a heavy log is rolled on the thighs with men standing on top, which results in ripped muscles. In Bibi Gurdev Kaur’s own words, “Then they put a heavy roller on my thighs and made a few policemen stand on it, while others rotated it. I kept on screaming but they hit me with belts and kept on asking me the whereabouts of my husband Kulwant Singh.” (B. Singh 9)

Several women were subjected to inhumane treatment in a similar way. A number of reports have been written to document the turbulent times. One of the several reports on the violence reveals the plight of women. “Women recognised as recently widowed are 1300 in number; most of them young, the majority illiterate, once dependent on their husband, absorbed in their home and families, who had never gone out to work, are today alone facing a merciless world; with kids to look after, no husband to fall back on, no home to go back to, No Gurudwara or Granthi to turn to for solace and those agonizing cries of a burning man piercing her heart-she is like a lost soul, some have lost their minds. Many are ill after rape” (Rao 14).

Several reports mention atrocities done on women as a part of the report. Among others, *1984 Sikhs’ Kristallnacht* discusses “Mass Rape”, *Twenty years of Impunity* talks about “sexual violence”, *Arms to fight, Arms to protect* devotes a section to the horrifying experiences of women during and after the killings. But it is difficult to find a book focused on the suffering of women. The treatment of the subject in the available reports remains marginal.

The word “representation” denotes the portrayal of someone or something in a particular way. As far as representation of history is concerned, its accuracy is objectionable since history

itself has become a text. “There are two meanings of the word ‘history’: (a) ‘the events of the past’ and (b) ‘telling a story about the events of the past’. Poststructuralist thought makes it clear that history is always ‘narrated’, and that therefore the first sense is problematic. The past can never be available to us in pure form, but always in the form of ‘representations’” (Selden 181).

One of the reasons for the inadequate representation of atrocities on women is the association of women’s bodies with honour i.e. withholding the honour of the family is considered more important than acknowledging injustice and violence. A research paper contends that the reason behind inadequate reporting is the lack of female journalists at that time. “While a number of authors and historians penned memoirs of those days, with many digging out the truth that prevailed then, the suffering of the people caused by the reckless killings at the hands of the armed youth, especially of caused to the women, who lost their sons, husbands and even fathers to the ‘insanity’ that gripped a large section of the Punjabi society, almost went ‘under-reported’ during those days... Also there weren’t many women journalists to write on female sufferings” (Sirhindi 1).

New Historicists believe in parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts. “History is not some unmediated reality out there, some stable background that the literary text reflects or refers to; it is not a context. Rather, it is like the literary text itself - of a different genre, granted, but no less a discourse. Such a view might seem to undo the privilege of the literary text or of “history” - depending on whether someone valorizes an aesthetic distinction or an ontological one - but it does make it possible to study relations between texts both literary and historical and discover how they trace certain patterns and negotiate various kinds of cultural meaning” (Rivkin 506). It is with this understanding that the present paper also makes use of fiction to seek answers to some questions regarding women with reference to Jaspreet Singh’s *Helium*.

Raj Kumar witnessed the heinous murder of his Professor during the anti-Sikh violence in 1984. He could not be at peace even after shifting to New York. He returns to India to find solace but ends up guilt-ridden for being the son of a mass-murderer. The truth is revealed through his renewed acquaintance with Nelly who is his Professor’s widow. Amandeep Sandhu in his review of *Helium* says, “The novel comes alive when Raj travels to Shimla. Jaspreet allows Nelly to take over the story, to tell her tale as a woman witness to the pogrom. In this discourse on riots, the author centre-stages those who are seldom given voice when histories are documented. The novel shows how, even though she is a victim, she has been repeatedly attacked and silenced.”

Helium depicts the suffering of Nelly Kaur, Professor Singh’s wife. She witnessed her brother and her daughter, Indira (who was dressed as a boy) being humiliated, tortured and burnt. When she heard that her husband had been burnt alive at the railway station, she “slipped into a vegetable-like state” (J. Singh 134). She couldn’t even comfort her son.

But something had changed in our relationship. I was not able to touch him after that. I have not been able to touch anyone since November '84. (J. Singh 134)

When she finally moved to Shimla, her son, Arjun had been hallucinating about his father and had not accepted the fact that he's no more. One day, he didn't return home from school. This made it impossible for her to survive. She experienced "prolonged periods of memory lapses during the first eighteen months of her arrival" in Shimla. She had sleeplessness, nausea and a dull crackling silence. She would begin to scream discontinuously and would behave as if she were counting something mentally. She gave up eating altogether or would eat only if Maribel read her the stories that she used to read to her children. She would walk aimlessly for several days and return home with no recall of where she went or stayed. In dismay, she would utter, "Nothing makes sense. Nothing. No sense at all. Nothing" (J. Singh 171-2).

In her bedroom, Nelly would read a children's story aloud as if reading to someone. Raj never knocked at the door to ask but a large collection of children's books in the living room made him conclude that Nelly imagined Arjun and Indira listening to her story:

My conjecture was Nelly chose a different book every night and read it aloud to an imaginary child curled up in bed. This is how she had maintained her sanity. (J. Singh 99)

After Arjun's disappearance, she began charting different paths he could have taken and different places he could have gone to. She would even try to communicate with people on those paths through letters or emails.

The text also depicts the suffering of Raj's mother who passed away when he was in Ithaca. She knew about her husband's misdeeds and did not want to be a part of them. She practised passive resistance i.e. she protested against her husband's actions but not so openly. Her gestures communicated her response. She stopped sleeping in the same room as him when she couldn't bear the burden. She even denied him any intimacy at all. She questioned him regarding the torture which he would shrug off saying it is a part of his job. A husband's glory is supposed to make a wife proud but she would boycott such events. "Mother didn't attend the ceremony. When Father got his gallantry medal in '85, she stayed home" (J. Singh 262).

One of the characters Gopal Uncle remarks, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (J. Singh 214). Whenever Nelly tried to raise her voice against oppression, she was silenced. Nelly tried to testify in a court case twice. She was brutally ordered to stay away once through severe beating and the second time, through an acid attack. The wounds healed but triggered PTSD i.e. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (J. Singh 170). Nelly tried all she could, to be of some help to the victims. "Two days after she agreed to do so, someone threw concentrated

acid on her neck...A portion of her neck simply melted away, and she spent months afterwards undergoing treatment...Nelly had to put on a special cast around her neck” (J. Singh 171).

Since she had witnessed the trauma from such close quarters, she decided to archive a monumental oral history project. She started the oral history project for she believed “As long as I am alive, my story is alive” (J. Singh 136-7). She secretly archived material related to November '84 (lists of the guilty citizens, cuttings of interviews with a few survivors, photographs, papers etc) in Hume Papers (J. Singh 206). In response to the question, “The book is also about Nelly’s haunting testimonial on the pogrom. Comment”, Jaspreet Singh in an interview replied, “Nelly is a significant part of *Helium*. She is our narrator’s link to the targeted collective. In Shimla, Nelly clandestinely assembles an archive of November 1984, files and boxes containing concentrated pain and evidence. Later she sets up an oral history institute in Delhi. But the world around her is not interested, and continues to treat Nelly as a ‘contaminated object’.”

Nelly had known that Raj’s father was one of the perpetrators of the violence yet she didn’t share it with Raj. She didn’t even talk about it when Raj shared that his father had been faking Alzheimer’s. Raj could not ‘tell’ her out of guilt. But the moment Raj’s father entered the same room as Nelly and Raj, her body spoke for her. “She was speechless. A complete conflagration of words. I am unable to forget the fading colour on her face in the midst of a phase transition...Dull anger is not enough. Nor a lump in the throat, nor an involuntary drying of the upper mouth. ...Nelly’s body shook. Something within her was still crying” (J. Singh 263).

The plot is undoubtedly focused on Nelly’s suffering but the protagonist is Raj who travels to India and then to Shimla to find Nelly. He is the voice that reveals Nelly’s story. The author’s choice of making a male character the protagonist even when he was to narrate a female character’s tale is questionable. It also makes the reader wonder what the probable plot would be, if Nelly were the protagonist. Her point of view might offer a better narration. It also highlights the agency being denied to Nelly for voicing her own tale. The intention behind preventing Nelly from sharing her tale in her own words is questionable.

Besides, the female characters have been portrayed as “the other” to male characters. It seems that the male characters are in the position of subject with respect to the female characters as object. “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.” (Beauvoir 26)

The system either denied Nelly’s suffering or tried to use it for getting back at enemies. An article on Nelly’s retirement didn’t have a word on the pain she had endured. “What struck

me the most was that no mention was made of what her life was before she moved to Shimla. How she survived Delhi. What happened to her children...No details of her ‘monumental project’ (J. Singh 79). During the anti-Sikh violence in November ‘84, she was saved by a “saviour” who posed as her husband and took her to his house. Years later, a Congressman was invited to her retirement party inspite of her protests. Besides being forced to face the man who destroyed her world, she was asked by the saviour to make the retirement speech in order to shame the Congressman, since he himself belonged to the opposing Hindu Party. When she refused, he beat her furiously causing her to limp for several days after that. The “saviour” by saving her, believed that he could force her to do whatever he wanted and punish her suitably if she refused to do so. Besides, Raj’s mother could even get her husband arrested for the misdeeds he’d committed but she does not. She lacks the courage to reveal the truth whereas her husband has the audacity to proudly live with his crime. She becomes “the other” that her husband defines himself against.

Nelly witnessed an incident in which two women were repeatedly raped by four men. At the time of trials in court, Sikh men chose to remain silent and Hindu men denied all charges. This implies that women are nothing more than insignificant beings that can be abused at will and denied acknowledgement thereafter. It is even more dishonourable if it was done in the name of honour. Women’s body is associated with the honour of the community they belong to and hence, its abuse becomes the most appropriate way of dishonouring the community. In fact, Nelly’s relationship with the savior too is shrouded in silence. It is never revealed completely. This is precisely why the suffering of women does not find expression.

In spite of being the centre of the narration, women have been portrayed as helpless victims or survivors. Besides, the writer focuses only on the struggle of middle class women but the matter of fact is that the majority of the women, who suffered, belonged to the slums. It is questionable whether this has been done to address a specific readership or to adhere to unwritten rules of publishing. It can be concluded that the focus of the journalistic and historical material is on the turbulence but Jaspreet Singh’s *Helium* concentrates on the people who suffered.

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