



THE UNSPEAKABILITY OF TRAUMA AND POSTMODERNISM: REPRESENTATION OF THE 1984 ANTI- SIKH RIOTS IN JASPREET SINGH'S HELIUM

Ranjitha Raj*

Abstract

Traumatic experiences, within the theoretical formulations of the First Wave of Trauma theorists, are considered unspeakable and unrepresentable through ordinary communicative language. It is observed that the intensity of the traumatic event shatters the psyche and destroys the mind's ability to comprehend and linguistically narrate it. It is through the language of literature, which can surpass the ordinary language, that trauma is best articulated. Trauma's structure as an incomprehensible experience challenges the possibilities of representation, and the notion of straightforward textual referentiality. Literary language's ability to communicate trauma through different anti-narrative strategies like fragmentation, discontinuity, the inclusion of different stylistic features, disruptions, and intertextuality is seen as significant. The paper titled "The Unspeakability of Trauma and Postmodernism: Representation of the 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots/Delhi Riots in Jaspreet Singh's Helium" attempts to analyse the novel *Helium*(2013) written by the Indian-Canadian author Jaspreet Singh as a trauma text. It can be observed that different postmodern techniques are used in the novel to represent the traumatic effects of the 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots that happened in New Delhi, the capital city of India by the writer. The novel's heavy reliance on postmodern features seems to have helped in the articulation of the traumatic impacts of the incident.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Trauma, Anti-Sikh Riots, Fiction

*PhD Scholar, Department of Cultural Studies, Tezpur University, India, Email: ranjitharaj.411@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0001-8428-3607

DOI: 10.53555/ecb/2024.13.02.20

Introduction

A historical narrative is open to revision and new interpretations. Reinterpreting and rewriting history can be seen as an important political undertaking, particularly when it comes to past acts of brutality that had a tremendous influence on the population of a country. Engaging in this process makes it easier to comprehend history from a variety of angles, which improves the portrayal of reality to be more accurate and nuanced. This becomes even more significant if the existing narrative is largely created and controlled by the state by suppressing all counter-discourses by favouring only a single dominant truth of an incident. However, it is difficult to divide the historiographical process into discrete stages of original history and later rewriting when looking at the Anti-Sikh Riots of 1984. The main cause of this problem is the lack of an accurate historical account that captures the truth of what happened. After the 1984 Riots, there was very little historical record that was not substantially impacted by political propaganda.

Nevertheless, the role played by fictional works has been noteworthy in contributing to the process of uncovering the truth of violence and officially presenting an alternative discourse regarding the catastrophe. However, documenting history encounters challenges, particularly as writing is influenced by the traumatic aftermath of the incident. Literary authors employ various strategies to convey both the reality and the traumatic repercussions, a distinctive feature of fictional works related to the 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots. This paper aims to scrutinize the novel *Helium* by Indian-Canadian author Jaspreet Singh through the lens of post-modern theoretical concepts. It explores the literary techniques employed by the author to chronicle the history and trauma of the incident while resisting the prevailing narrative.

1984 Anti- Sikh Riots/Delhi Riots: Post-Independent India's Largest Communal Riot

There have been multiple incidents of communal violence with minor and major intensity in India since the year of Independence. Such incidents which stand in stark contrast with set agendas and the progressive secular goals of the newly formed democracy, continue to occur in different magnitudes and forms. The Anti- Sikh riots or the Delhi Riots, as it has been previously called, happened in New Delhi, the capital city of India and a few other places across the country. The incident happened as an immediate result of the assassination of the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. Following

the Prime Minister's assassination, the capital city underwent a complex and violent series of incidents which were focused primarily on the Sikh population. In the three-day-long violence, thousands lost their lives and many more were injured.

What followed the largest communal violence of post-independent India was decades-long silencing and suppression of the truths of what happened. The official documents largely manipulated data and suppressed the reality narrated only one side of the story and silenced the voices of the victim population. As a result, the incident resulted in severe criticisms against the then-ruling Congress government which was accused of playing a major hand in organizing the violence and then displaying indifference to the incidents of violence. The severity of the violence is increased by the fact that the clear and honest facts of the horrifying episodes were either not published objectively or were concealed by dishonest political influences. About the role of the system and suppression of truths of the incident, Ashish Nandy wrote "The 1984 riot showed how a regime can use not only the state machinery but also the judicial process to subvert justice.consequences"(2007). What becomes apparent here is that the hegemonic interventions of the state have intentionally omitted and misrepresented the genesis of the violence in 1984. The aftermath of the 1984 Delhi Riots, also known as the Anti-Sikh Riots in India, was characterized by a prolonged and unsettling silence. This silence endured for decades, a result of both the unimaginable nature of the tragedy and the intentional efforts by the state to suppress dissenting voices. Over time, sporadic acts of resistance emerged, accompanied by the retelling, recording, and reinterpreting of memories related to the events. The horrors of the incident were vividly imagined and expressed, leading to the creation of a discourse that, though scattered and fragmented, remains largely unified in its emphasis on the language of trauma as a challenging element to comprehend.

Although the violent events and killings that transpired across the nation between October 31st and November 2nd, 1984, were officially and unofficially labelled as riots, there was considerable disagreement among historians, writers, and notably the victims' community. Literature addressing the incident, as well as various artistic representations such as films and paintings, depicted it as a pogrom through their respective mediums. These works suggested that it was a coordinated massacre targeting the Sikh community, rather than a series of random violent

clashes between religious groups. Recent writings spanning the past two decades, aimed at uncovering the truth of the incident, shed light on its alarming reality. Jarnail Singh, author of *I Accuse...: The Anti-Sikh Violence of 1984* (2009), which extensively covered the incident, affirmed that it constituted organized killings rather than mere riots (2009, 25). The organized nature of the incident becomes evident in the fictional renditions of the incident as well. The literary works that have appeared in the recent decades have been playing major roles in portraying this reality.

The Fictional Works of 1984 Riots and Jaspreet Singh's *Helium*

After a prolonged silence for decades, the literary voices started reflecting upon the catastrophic incident of 1984. Such works represented their versions of the incident in diverse genres like poetry, novels, plays and short stories. Above all, the impact fictional works could have was much more. Such writings include novels like *Amu* (2004) by Shonali Bose, *Pages Stained with Blood* (2002) by Indira Goswami, *The Assassination* (2017) by Vikram Kapur, *Stillborn Season* (2018) by Radhika Oberoi, *Helium* (2013) by Jaspreet Singh, and *Saffron Salvation* (1999) by Simarjit Kaur and short story collections like *1984 In Memory and Imagination: Personal Essays and Short Stories on the 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots* (2016) compiled and edited by Vikram Kapur, and *Night of the Restless Spirits* (2020) written by Sarbpreet Singh.

These literary works have undertaken the task of revealing the involvement of political interests and the sway of powerful groups in an event that had long been suppressed. Emerging in the early years of the current century after a prolonged period of silence, these writings seem to share a common objective: to amplify the voices of the afflicted and dismantle the deliberate efforts to suppress discussion of the issue. Spanning various genres, these literary works contribute to a collective cultural effort aimed at challenging the prevailing narrative. Through diverse literary responses, they seek to capture and revitalize the egregious nature of past events that left a lasting mark on the collective consciousness of the affected community. Deeply rooted in the history of the 1984 riots, these writings offer alternative perspectives that collectively underscore the severity of the societal wound inflicted.

Helium by Jaspreet Singh in one of such fictional responses to the Riot of 1984, which has attempted to represent the horrors through the language of trauma. *Helium* revolves around the lives of two

characters who are traumatized by the experiences they went through during the Anti-Sikh Riots. The novel which examines the incident side by side with the Holocaust gives great significance to the severity of wounds and pain such incidents can inflict. I would be analysing the literary methods through which the writer communicates the traumatic history of the incident, which was unspeakable.

The narrative focuses on the experiences of Raj and Nelly, two individuals profoundly affected by the three-day violence in Delhi. Examining the event alongside the Holocaust, the novel underscores the profound mental anguish and suffering such atrocities can engender. The author of "*Helium*" himself witnessed the Anti-Sikh Riots firsthand and, even after relocating to Canada in the years following the incident, encountered numerous individuals still grappling with the trauma it inflicted.

Singh employs a multi-genre approach in the novel, integrating a range of elements such as photographs, newspaper clippings, interviews, drawings, and oral histories. This approach lends authenticity to his narrative, bringing it closer to a genuine portrayal of historical events. Singh notes about the creative approach he used, "Most known models were inadequate to narrate November 1984. I had to figure out a new way to write. Hence, *Helium* was a resolution of such a creative crisis" (Quoted in Mann, 2018).

Singh adopts a primarily postmodern writing style as he endeavours to document the truths and the trauma stemming from the Anti-Sikh violence. He utilizes diverse postmodern techniques to convey the indescribable nature of trauma. The narrative unfolds through the first-person perspective of Raj, who is engaged in the act of writing a novel to grapple with his traumatic history. This paper attempts to examine the postmodern narrative strategies employed by the writer in representing the trauma caused by the incident, which in general is considered as unnarratable and unspeakable.

The Unspeakability of Trauma and Postmodernism in *Helium*

In the realm of Trauma Studies, traumatic experiences are frequently characterized as unutterable. Prominent scholars in literary trauma studies emphasize that conventional linguistic methods cannot adequately capture or convey traumatic experiences. These experiences are often beyond comprehension and thus cannot be accessed through typical modes of human perception or conventional communication. Literature, particularly fiction, has emerged as a

potent medium for communicating the shapeless and inexpressible aspects of trauma. In the words of Cathy Caruth the pioneer in the field of trauma studies, experiences of trauma “can never be asked in a straightforward way, but must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (Caruth 1996, 5).

The possibilities of adopting postmodern strategies in conveying and representing the traumatic suffering of individuals as well as communities have not been alien to the major scholars in the field. For example, about the relation between postmodernism and trauma studies, Anne Whitehead writes in her canonical book *Trauma Fiction* (82),

[Postmodernism's] innovative forms and techniques critique the notion of history as grand narratives, and it calls attention to the complexity of memory. Trauma fiction emerges out of postmodernist fiction and shares its tendency to bring conventional narrative techniques to their limit.

Authors who write about trauma often use creative writing techniques to show that traumatic experiences can't be fully expressed or remembered accurately. These writers use literary methods that reflect the effects of trauma itself. When trauma survivors try to talk about and make sense of what happened to them, they often use narrative techniques similar to those used by postmodern writers.

When it comes to the fictional works written based on the 1984 Riots, including *Helium*, apart from the lack of information available about the incident, there are also hurdles caused by the confrontation with trauma which block understanding and narration about the riot. Literature describing the 1984 riots seems affected by the repressive measures implemented by the ruling authorities to control the transmission of truth among the public, along with unspeakability caused by trauma. Amitav Ghosh, the notable Indian English writer, as an eyewitness to the Sikh carnage, talks about the profound burden to tell the story of 1984 in his 1995 essay entitled ‘The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi’. Ghosh writes about the representational challenges that November 1984 poses for writers. Ghosh argues, that writers ‘failed to find a form—or a style or a voice or a plot—that could accommodate both violence and the civilized willed response to it. It is at this point that Jaspreet Singh’s novel and his narrative strategies made use of in the novel become relevant. Jaspreet Singh follows a postmodern narrative style in the novel *Helium* to

express the trauma inflicted and the truth of what happened. He tries to show the social responsibility and the necessity of addressing the faked historical amnesia and exposing the politics involved.

Jaspreet Singh attempts to articulate the deep and lingering trauma that is inflicted by the catastrophe and at the same time attempts to unveil, as already mentioned in the previous pages, the repressed realities and political intentions. He also questions the idealized depiction of a secular, multi-cultural, and unified state which claims to encompass all religious differences in harmony. Singh has adopted a complex, multi-genre narrative approach, by incorporating elements such as fiction, oral accounts, survivor testimonials, photographs, drawings, travelogue entries, documentaries, thrillers, and intertextual storytelling. By blending fictional elements with archival records, personal memoirs, biographies, historical accounts, and scientific insights, the novel highlights the insufficiency of any singular medium or genre to capture the magnitude of the atrocities of 1984.

Jaspreet Singh adopts a postmodern narrative style to depict the trauma resulting from the Anti-Sikh violence of 1984 within a fictional context. He employs various postmodern techniques to illustrate the indescribable nature of trauma. Particularly noteworthy is the novel's incorporation and blending of multiple literary works. Intertextuality in the novel serves a crucial role in adding depth and significance to the experience of trauma. Here, intertextuality functions as a device to imbue additional meaning and connotations to the otherwise inexpressible trauma. Singh heavily draws upon the short story collection of Italian Holocaust survivor Primo Levi within the novel. Levi's collection *The Periodic Table*, published in 1975, is consistently referenced in the novel, establishing parallels between the traumatic experiences of both narrators. This technique effectively aids in representing the trauma of the 1984 riots. Raj, the narrator in Singh’s novel finds himself drawn to Levi and his book. Singh writes, On the brown shelf I found an object with a familiar smell; it had touched my hands, also his hands in 1984. Levi’s cover photo stared at me...Humans capable of such cruelty to other humans. Depression. Suicidal thoughts...The Periodic Table appeared in English for the first time in November, the time of the riots. Random coincidences. Signifying nothing.. and it didn’t feel merely random, as if the coincidence carried a ring of inevitability. (66)

The narrator notes that Primo Levi's book, *The Periodic Table* serves as Levi's reaction to the

Holocaust, with each story named after a chemical element. This collection chronicles Levi's experiences as a Jewish-Italian chemist before, during, and after Auschwitz. In Jaspreet Singh's novel, a similar narrative style is adopted. Singh utilizes the chemical element Helium and its unique characteristics to illustrate the trauma endured by his protagonist, Raj. Raj is particularly captivated by Levi's use of chemical elements to articulate his own traumatic past. He acknowledges that he heavily relies on Levi's book to comprehend his own experiences of trauma. This reliance highlights the resonance and significance of Levi's narrative approach in helping individuals like Raj make sense of their own harrowing experiences.

Raj witnesses his professor being burned alive by the group of perpetrators during the time of violence, which later becomes the main cause of his trauma. While narrating the incident, Singh writes, " I was a mere onlooker. In the end, all that remained along with the ashes were a few bones and a steel bracelet. Black like a griddle. If Primo Levi had witnessed the moment he would have written the chapter called Sulphur differently. Sulphur is used to vulcanise rubber that is used in tyres. Primo Levi survived the German Nazis and Italian Fascists because he helped them prepare Buna rubber during the war. In India, my compatriots slipped rubber around Professor Singh's neck and set him on fire" (32).

Singh repeatedly alludes to "The Periodic Table" as a foundational text in his own novel, evident in his choice to title his work "*Helium*," echoing Levi's approach. He concludes his narrative by referencing chemistry and archives once more, emphasizing the parallels between the events in Punjab in 1984 and the Holocaust. This recurrence of themes underscores Singh's deliberate emulation of Levi's style and thematic concerns throughout his narrative. Though *Helium* alludes greatly to Levi's writings as the foundational text and a model for bringing to light the traumatic sufferings, Singh has laid a few other intertextual connections too in the novel.

Other than Primo Levi's *Periodic Table*, Singh includes references to different writings that represented the trauma of the Partition of India and Pakistan in the year 1947. He interlinks the trauma of both incidents by bringing in various fictional responses to the partition. W. G. Sebald and his writings along with Levi is mentioned constantly on the grounds that engaged with the subject of genocidal violence and other calamities. Then there is the repeated mention of the writings of Rudyard Kipling, whose different books are mentioned as helping Nelly to maintain her sanity. Other than

these texts there are also different books coming under the discipline of Ornithology. The intertextual connections drawn between the writings of Allan Octavian Hume, above all, play a significant role in the novel. Hume's books in Ornithology like *From Lahore to Yarcanda*, *The Nests and Birds of the Empire*, and a few other related books play significant roles in the novel. The books about birds help Nelly, the other traumatized character in Singh's novel, to make sense of what happened in the past and keep her sane.

Postmodernism has been defined as an "incredulity towards metanarratives." Metanarratives, alternatively labelled as grand narratives or master narratives, are overarching frameworks aimed at offering a thorough interpretation of events and experiences. Postmodernists critique metanarratives, attributing their emergence to totalitarian agendas and dismissing them for perpetuating essentialist ideologies. In opposition to grand narratives, postmodernists highlight the significance of small narratives, which serve to undermine the notion of discourse being uniform or unified, instead advocating for pluralism. This perspective is articulated by Lyotard in his work *The Postmodern Condition* (1979).

Through his novel *Helium*, Jaspreet Singh challenges the dominant narrative about the reality of the riots. According to the official data that documented the incidents of violence that happened following Indira Gandhi's assassination, it was a series of communal clashes between two religious communities and both were affected severely. Singh tries to establish that the history of 1984 violence has been subjected to planned omissions and misrepresentations through state-involved measures, and what happened, in reality, was organized violence led by the ruling political party against the victim community. In the article discussing the repressive measures carried out by the government during and after the occurrence of the 1984 violence, the writer Parvinder Mehta writes, " there is the need to further unveil the repressive practices and initiate paradigm shifts around the hegemonic discourse of 1984, that projects only a single dangerous story" (2015). Singh attempts to rewrite the hegemonic discourse of 1984 through his narrative. Through the character Raj and Nelly and their attempts to make sense of their traumatic past, Singh unveils the truth about the incident. The involvement of the state, police force and political party is established in the novel. Nelly's monologue plays a significant role in rewriting the dominant narrative. Nelly's archival collection which shows the truth of the

incidnet, is another element in the novel that shows the other side of the violence.

Another postmodern technique that is visible in Singh's novel is pastiche. Pastiche means to combine, or "paste" together, multiple elements. In order to represent the trauma left by the violence of 1984, Singh combines multiple genres to create a unique narrative, which assists in comprehending the incident that led to the trauma of the community. He incorporates photographs of the incident, and paintings that portray the horror of what happened, and uses the style of science fiction, ornithology, interviews, and newspaper reports in the text. This multi-generic approach works like a collage and assists in making the incident intelligible.

Other than all the above-mentioned postmodern techniques that are employed in the fictional narrative, it can be observed that Singh also adopts the style of metafiction. Metafiction is another characteristic of postmodern fiction. By exposing the reader to the artificiality of art or the fictional aspects of a story, metafiction generally abandons the need for a "willing suspension of disbelief." It is frequently employed to cast doubt on the author's authority and bring about unanticipated story twists. The novel, as given in by the narrator, is a result of his attempt to make sense of the incident. The novel is presented as the result of Raj's attempt to write a novel about the 1984 riots which led to his trauma. He collects information and raw materials for writing the book, through which the story of what happened is revealed. Raj says in the novel, "These notes are not about tragic industrial disasters. I am assembling material connected to an unspeakable event that took place in Delhi" While trying to explain his troubled past, Raj continues his writing "Troubled once again is the wrong word. The word I would like to use does not exist. "(9) Raj's writing also serves a therapeutic function. Raj admits that he writes to relieve his pain and make sense of the horrific incident that led to his trauma. "In my free time, on my colleague's and Clara's request, I have started writing science fiction and slowly I found that my notes a real dimension, it has transformed into Professor Singh's story"(88). He continues, "In my attempt to decipher the past, in my note-taking, I am not a coward. I am trying to achieve more and more clarity."(89)

Singh also uses dispersed or fragmented narrative voice, a style of narration that employs multiple authorial voices/perspectives and nonlinear emplotment which are also postmodern. The novel in most parts follows the first-person narration of Raj. But Nelly also becomes a narrator in multiple

contexts. What happened to Nelly and her family is narrated by Nelly herself and she reveals the traumatic impacts the incident had resulted in. The involvement of the state is also made clear in her narrative, which helps to add credibility to what Raj tries to explain in the novel.

Conclusion

The fictional writings based on the 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots have played significant roles in documenting the reality of the incident by countering the metanarrative regarding the incident which told a unified, single narrative from the side of the state. Each fictional voice has been efficiently communicating the traumatic impacts of the incident through their versions of the history of the incident in the decades following the incident after a long silence. The place of Jaspreet Singh's novel is significant in the genre of 1984 fiction. Unlike other writers, Jaspreet Singh has adopted a post-modern narrative style in the novel to represent the atrocities committed during the incident and the trauma inflicted as a result. The different postmodern strategies like intertextuality, pastiche, rejection of metanarratives and the like seem to have played remarkable roles in communicating the trauma and the reality of the suffering of the community. It can be observed that the writer's narrative attempts have been successful in reflecting the unutterable or unspeakable trauma of the affected section of people.

Bibliography

1. Bose, Shonali. (2004). *Amu*. Penguin Books, New Delhi.
2. Caruth, Cathy. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
3. Ghosh, Amitav. (1995). The Ghosts of Mrs Gandhi. *The New Yorker*. DOI:<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1995/07/17/the-ghosts-of-mrs-gandhi>
4. Goswami, Indira.(2002). *Pages Stained with Blood*. Pradip Acharya, Translates. Katha, New Delhi.
5. Kapur, Vikram. (2017). *The Asaassinations: A Novel of 1984*. Speaking Tiger, New Delhi.
6. Kapur, Vikram. (2016). *1984 In Memory and Imagination: Personal Essay and Short Fiction on the 1984 Anti- Sikh Riots*. Amaryliss, New Delhi.
7. Levi, Primo. *The Periodic Table*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal, Schocken Books, 1984.
8. Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated

- by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
9. Mann, Harveen Sachdeva. (2018). "Our Periodic Table of Hate: the Archive of 1984 Punjab in Jaspreet Singh's Helium". *Sikh Formations*.14:1, 26-54, DOI: 10.1080/17448727.2018.1408239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2018.1408239>
 - 10.Mehta, Parvinder.(2015). *Repressive Silences and Whispers of History: Lessons and Legacies of 1984*. *Sikh Formations*. DOI: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17448727.2015.1099342>
 - 11.Nandy, Ashish.(2007). *The Page Enchanted*. *Outlook*. DOI: <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/the-page-enchanted/236368>
 - 12.Oberoi, Radhika. (2018). *Stillborn Season: A Novel*. Speaking Tiger, New Delhi.
 - 13.Singh, Jarnail. (2009). *I Accuse...: The Anti-Sikh Violence of 1984*. Penguin Random House India, Haryana.
 - 14.Singh, Jaspreet.(2013). *Helium*. Bloomsbury Publishing. New Delhi.
 - 15.Singh, Sarbpreet. 2020. *Night of the Restless Spirits: Stories from 1984*.Haryana: Penguin Random House.
 - 16.Whitehead, Anne. (2004). *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.