

Book Review: *Jallianwala Bagh Literary Responses in Prose and Poetry* (2019) by Rakshanda Jalil

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The Jallianwala Bagh incident has remained a spectral and contrite event in the collective memory of Indian sub-continent over decades. It echoes unhealed ruptures and gets rekindled as a result of public and political expectations in the form of official apology from the erstwhile colonisers. On the eve of the centennial anniversary of Jallianwala Bagh incident, literary historian, translator and critic Rakshanda Jalil, has published her book, *Jallianwala Bagh Literary Responses in Prose and Poetry*. The book occupies a crucial position as there is discernible dearth of literature and historic fiction surrounding the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh in April, 1919. Literary contributions on the subservient life under the East India Company allow for a study on not just the experiences of the colonial subjects but also the imagined realities they had of their colonisers. The narratives of this traumatic experience cannot be solely attributed to the events of the Jallianwala Massacre but also to the events which preceded the hot summer afternoon of Baisakhi in April 1919.

Punjab has always been one of the main platforms of turbulence even before the colonisation of India by British East India Company. The people from Punjab were preferred over other provinces, for military recruitment during the World War I because of the British theory of 'martial races' (Jalil, 10) where they ranked people from various provinces on their superiority in war front. Writings from Punjab is quite rich in authentic regional flavours and that is reflected in their cultural production. One can always see the presence of 'Punjab' or what it means to be 'Punjabi' in their writings. Punjab has not only contributed to the nation, great revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh, Lala Lajpat Rai, Udham Singh, Harnam Singh Saini for the Independence movement, also writers of great calibre like Manto, Bhisham Sahni, Josh Malihabadi, Ghulam Abbas and such who have encapsulated the residual scars of the traumatic events of the past in literary fiction and poetry.

In the introduction to her book, Jalil talks about her interest in literature arising from the interstices between collective conscience and history. Being a seminal moment in the history of Independence of India and the subsequent partition of the Indian sub-continent; the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre has led to a wide emotional unrest amongst the population which effervesced into a nationwide political unrest. Critical analysis of the incident has been taken up for scholarly pursuits in varying contexts across time and space, while responses to it in Indian Literature across regional literature and in English have been overlooked. In the book, Jalil also points to the

nature of censorship imposed by the British on literature. Even letters from Indian soldiers who served in the World War was subjected to scrutiny; which portrays the extent of the British regimentation and surveillance on narratives which documented the colonial regime and the discontent it generated.

This collection which includes eleven prose writings, eleven poems and an excerpt from a play is intended to represent the popular imagination. It portrays how the masses responded to the event, the reasons led to the event and the consequences of the event. The prose writings featured here are windows into the imaginations of survivors, victims and the perpetrators. Jalil has managed to explore various avenues in which the psyche of grief-stricken Punjab could traverse into, at the wake of this particularly ghastly chapter of Indian Independence movement. The writers are able to bring in the experience of the victims and survivors and how the physical nature of this trauma has transcended to become an emotional scar in the history of East India Company's rule in India. A few of the poems included in this collection of literary responses to the event are *Jallianwala Bagh* by Muhammad Iqbal, *A Complaint to The Hunter* (Shikwa-e Saiyyad) by Tirllok Chand Mahroom, *The Tyrannies in the Punjab* (Mazalim-e Punjab) by Zafar Ali Khan, *An address to the Sons of the East India Company* (East India Company ke Farzanaon Se) by Josh Malihabadi. When read side by side, these poems evoke a sense of an experience left behind in the memory of the horrendous event. These reflect and ruminate on the reasons, conscience and consequences of being occupied by the East India company. The modernity that percolated into the social lives of the population had started getting scrutinisations under the shadow left behind this massacre. The poets through heart rendering words have been able to separate the civilising mission's visage off of the coloniser for the readers to witness. The literature of this period thus critically expressed their dissatisfaction against the dictatorial measures of General Dyer and the British Government. The repressive attitude of General Dyer and his fellow soldiers was denounced unequivocally in these literary works published between 1919 and 1923 in Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu and English languages and these writings were highly 'seditious' in character. Many of these literatures were proscribed by the Government of Punjab and later on these received similar fate in all provincial governments.

The fiction has been an outlet to channelize the emotions that Jallianwala Bagh let loose in the hearts of the colonised subjects and also has in retrospect left the readers with an opening to look back into the psyche of the survivors of this gruesome event. The eleven poems featured in this collection are odes to the lives that were laid down in Jallianwala Bagh. It raises questions pertinent to the nature of humanity. An elaborate introduction in the beginning of the book illuminates the history building to the incident and how it was represented in several languages across numerous genres and the social context of each. The nature and location the gazes from which these responses are also mentioned in this introduction.

The incident of Jallianwala Bagh predicated the final days of British rule in India. Furthermore, the literary responses post-Jallianwala Bagh which originated nationwide unveiled the imperialistic intent of the British beneath the mask of the civilizing mission for the Indian population to witness.

When considered as a whole, the prose and poems in this book meticulously explores the following themes. Firstly, the role nationalist policies and colonial regime played in the (Jalil, 2019) activities of the Indian public and the confusion it unfurled into their domestic lives, when politics intermingled with the socio-cultural practices; secondly, the thought process of the natives who were confronted with conflict of power structures, for instance a social obligation v/s adherence to the colonial dictum, and thirdly, the native's inability to discern the extent of the

catastrophic measures taken by the British to keep up their colonial superiority (crawling order and shooting on Baisakhi) and the experience of being subjected to this unearned violence. Finally, the Jallianwala Bagh incident has played an important role in understanding the nature of humanity in power transactions that existed between colonised and colonisers.

Many contemporary debates discuss the ramifications this event has elicited and the nature of accountability it deserves. Moreover, these discussions are yet to result in an agreeable acknowledgement of the nature of events that transpired between the coloniser and colonised. An inclusion of the evolution of multiple reflective voices from both Indian and British contexts, rather than a collection of the immediate response would offer much to the scholarship on the literature of Jallianwala Bagh. It would result in more engaging academic debates in trauma literature, protest literature and studies on imperialism and colonialism. Besides the introduction that elaborated on the history and context of every literary response in this compilation will help the readers further to ruminate on the representations of this event and its relevance for the present times.

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