



**Research Paper**

## Literature on Women during Jallianwala Bagh Massacre

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### ABSTRACT

Literature is an important source of history as it records the impulse of a society. Literature of all languages has depicted the pain and suffering of the people during Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. Dr. Gurdev Singh and Rakhshanda Jalil widely explored the contemporary literature of Jallianwala Bagh massacre. But the sufferings and emotions of women remains untouched in the historiography of the period under study. The present paper is an attempt in this direction. Contemporary literature of the period nicely described the emotions of mothers, sisters and wives of the martyrs. Ratan Devi (an eyewitness) is presented as the protagonist who is shown awake while the other Indian's are still asleep. Atar Kaur, another eyewitness, spent the whole night in the bagh with Ratan Kaur. Two, British female characters, Miss Sherwood and Mrs. Dyer are not represented happy with this act of British.

### KEYWORDS

Kavi Darbars, Khooni Vaisakhi, Nank Singh, Annie Dyer, Zenana Missionary Society, Ratan Devi, Atar Kaur, Chhaju Bhagat, Shahid Bhagat mal Bhatia, Sohan Lal Bhatia

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Literature is considered as the mirror of the society. It expresses the immediate hopes and aspirations of a society, of down trodden and the destitute. It has also the power to shape and mould the spirit of an age according to its new ideals. In this connection W.H. Hudson rightly says, "We care for literature on account of its deep and lasting significance. A great book grows directly out of life; in reading it, we are brought into large, close and fresh relation with life and in that fact lays the final explanation of its power. Literature is the vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it, what they have thought and felt about different aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. It is thus fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language."<sup>1</sup> Viewed thus, literature becomes a source of history. As now the scope of history is vast, it not only confined to past politics; it touches almost every domain of human life. Study of the literature of a period may also help to explore some important facts which still remain unexplored due to the absence of historical sources. Ranke's school of historians in search of the facts, are likely to miss the life of the common human being and the impulse and emotion which governed and dominated the feelings of the people living at a particular time. To have a vivid picture of the past times, one has to study the literature along with history. In accordance with these views of literature, the present research has been undertaken.

Jallianwala Bagh massacre has profound place in the history of British imperialism and among Indian Nationalists.<sup>2</sup> It was on the day of Baisakhi on 13 April 1919 that Colonel Reginald Dyer ordered his troops to fire on the people presented in the Jallianwala Bagh. It resulted in the death of hundreds and injuring a large number. This massacre had impacted the masses largely and the freedom movement greatly at that time. It turned loyal subjects of British Empire into freedom fighters, revolutionaries and even avenging assassins.<sup>3</sup> Indian leaders reacted greatly to this event. Rabindranath Tagore, the poet and scholar of that period, returned his Kinghood to Viceroy Chelmsford. Gandhi returned the Kaiser-I-Hind gold medal in August 1920. The massacre at Jallianwala Bagh had changed Gandhi from Empire loyalist to the implacable opponent of the British rule.<sup>4</sup> The atrocities in the Punjab weakened his faith in the British Empire. These marked the beginning

of the end of his sincere and unbounded co-operation with the British Government.<sup>5</sup> For Gandhi, the Bagh is a place of pilgrimage for all the communities of India as distinguished from Hardwar which is a pilgrimage center for Hindus only.<sup>6</sup>

Contemporary literature of different languages largely responded to this massacre. Works began to surface in public a year after the massacre.<sup>7</sup> Poets started pouring their hearts out in poems. Poems in response to this bloodbath were performed at KaviDarbars which were the major medium of reaching out to the masses.<sup>8</sup> Prose writers of different languages also responded to this event. As in words of RakhshandaJalil, 'Sometimes, when history is exceptionally brutal and bloody, the poet may fall silent but the prose writer is compelled to pick up his pen, and sometimes it is the other way round.'<sup>9</sup> Neither poetry nor fiction of that period is devoid of this massacre. All this literature has included the historical developments of the event into its fold. Prof. ChamanLal, former professor of Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, in his lecture at national seminar on JallianwalaBaghorganised by the History Department of Calcutta University said that facts have taken precedence over fiction in the fictions written on the JallianwalaBagh massacre. Viewed thus the literature on the JallianwalaBagh massacre has great importance from historical point of view.

So, modern scholars have started exploring this literature. Dr. Gurdev Singh Sidhu, who is famous for editing many books on poetry written during the freedom movement, edited a book on poetry of this massacre entitled 'Saka Bagh- a- Jallia'. Navdeep Suri, grandson of Nanak Singh<sup>10</sup>, published and translated his 'Khooni Vaisakhi'<sup>11</sup> into English. RakhshandaJalil has edited her work entitled, 'JallianwalaBagh: Literary Responses in Prose and Poetry.' The above mentioned works have referred about the sufferings and reactions of the common people as marked in the contemporary literature of the different languages. But the sufferings and the emotions of women during that time was overlooked in the JallianwalaBagh historiography. So, this paper is an attempt to highlight the sufferings and emotions of women at the time of the massacre as reflected in the contemporary literature.

To start with play Rang De Basanti Chola<sup>12</sup> written by BhishamShahni. This is originally in Hindi and translated into English by RakhshandaJalil. This is a three-act play and divided into ten scenes. The main character of the play is Ratan Devi.<sup>13</sup> She is a devotee wife. She stands by her husband in all thick and thin. She has respect for her husband's ideas who seemes Satyagrahi from the account when Ratan Devi replies to the question of Ishro that she does not like to put lip color as her husband wears Khaadi,

'Wahji! My husband wears khaadi and  
I should go around wearing lip color'<sup>14</sup>

This fact becomes clearer from another account in the play where she enquires from someone about her husband by giving his identity as BabuHemraj who works in the congress<sup>15</sup>. All the four women of the play feel worried about their dear ones by hearing the voice of firing and of the bullets going off in the JallianwalaBagh. One girl from among the four ran downstairs in the worry of her brother who has gone for the fair. Ishro and Ratan Devi are also worried as Ishro's, son Kishna is not at home. He has gone for the fair. On the other side, Ratan Devi's husband is also in the Bagh.

Ratan Devi is shown as a courageous woman as she is the only one among the four female characters of the play who goes outside in that turmoil. In extreme worry she ran out of her house barefooted and reaches in the Bagh. She even has extra ordinary brevity for staying in the bagh on the intervening night with AtarKaur and a male. Being a woman of firm determination she believes that she will find her husband. As a loving wife she laments on the body of her deceased husband. The agony of her separation from her husband was unbearable. She tried a lot to search a cart to take her husband's body to home. She doesn't have any fear of losing her life even two males characters of the play don't helped her because of fear. She is not even afraid of Dyer's army. She called her husband a martyr and brave heartily bid goodbye to him. In the end of the play she also questions to the atrocities of the British government and innocence of the subjects,

"Who's right, who's wrong! I spent  
all my time asking this. The ruler or  
the subjects?...He who sacrifice himself  
for others, who happily risked his life or  
he who massacred innocence and riddled  
them with bullets?"<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Shahriyaar's drama, Jallianwala<sup>17</sup> is written in Punjabi. This is divided into 15 scenes. Miss Sherwood, Ratana Devi and wife of Dyer (Annie Dyer) are the three historical characters which have been mentioned in this drama. The fifth scene is about Miss Marcella Sherwood, an English missionary, the manager of City Mission School, who worked for the Church of England's Zenana Missionary Society in Amritsar. She was beaten by the angry crowd and she was saved by a family. In sixth scene she thanked the family for saving her life. In seventh scene Dyer comes to the hospital to ask for her well being. Miss Sherwood is represented as a peace loving person who even wanted to teach the lesson of peace to Dyer<sup>18</sup>. She was not happy with Dyer's

action. The ninth scene is about Ratana Devi who after many hardships becomes able to find the body of her deceased husband. Mrs. Dyer found mention in the tenth scene where she is represented to advise her husband to be humble when he was going for trial after massacre. The mention of Mrs. Dyer is very important as she is hardly mentioned in any other source. All the three female characters of the play even two British are not represented happy with this act.

The short story *Shahid Pati De Lash* is in Punjabi and written by Arjansingh Gargaj<sup>19</sup>. It is based on the real story of a female named Atar Kaur<sup>20</sup> during the massacre. She is represented as a brave woman who in spite of her six months pregnancy<sup>21</sup> went to JallianwalaBagh after massacre and spent the whole night there by sitting besides the body of her husband and finally on next day became successful to bring his body back to home. She was a woman of self conscience, in

spite of her poverty and poor condition of her children, who refused to take compensation of twenty thousand from the Government. She maintained the ideals of Indian womanhood by refusing to take compensation as she did not want to take the price of her deceased husband. She even refused to take help from Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru in 1956 on the congress session in Amritsar by saying that she only wants to see the progress of the country. That is the biggest help for her and her children<sup>22</sup>. She is projected in the hope of taking revenge from the British Government when she said that she got peace only on that day when the wife of Dyer after taking his body in her lap will say to her children, "My children's your father is no more in this world."<sup>23</sup>

Babu Firoz Din Sharaf's<sup>24</sup> poem 'Raliya Khoon Hindu Musalman Ethe' also mentioned about the pain and suffering of women during the JallianwalaBagh massacre. This poem is originally in Punjabi and translated into English by Rakhshanda Jalil. The sister of those, who were killed in the massacre, were kept waiting.<sup>25</sup> The pain of those brides who have lost their grooms in the massacre is unsung. Even their graves will keep wailing.<sup>26</sup> Giani Hira Singh Dard's<sup>27</sup> poem *JallianwalaBagh di Vaisakhi* also depicts the pain and suffering of those sisters, mothers and wives who have lost their loving ones in the massacre.<sup>28</sup> This poem also narrates the story of Ratan Devi's suffering who spends the whole night in the Bagh on keeping the dead body of her

husband in her lap.<sup>29</sup> Further in this poem the Ratan Devi is presented as the protagonist who is shown awake while the other Indians are still asleep.<sup>30</sup> Her figure is used to arouse the conscience of Indians.

The whole literature be it drama's, short stories and poetry pertaining to the JallianwalaBagh massacre is replicated with the sufferings and emotions of women. As a result, of this atrocious incident, a large number of Punjabi women did not lag behind in protest against British and joined national politics.<sup>31</sup> However, this type of study, based on literature, is not completely free from inaccuracies as in his short story, *Shahid Pati De Lash*, Arjansingh Gargaj wrote that the Martial Law was imposed in Amritsar immediately after massacre. But the Martial Law was imposed on 16 April 1919. It has been found that literature has a much more-wider impact on the masses and in spite of its limitations literature reinforces the historical evidences further.

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- [6]. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- [7]. Sharma, Sarika, "Best of Writings from Worst of Times", *The Tribune*, 14 April, 2019.
- [8]. *Ibid.*
- [9]. Jalal, Rakhshanda, (Edited), *JallianwalaBagh : Literary Responses In Prose And Poetry*, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 7-8.
- [10]. Nanak Singh is a noted Punjabi writer and was among the survivors of the JallianwalaBagh massacre. He was just 22 years old at that time.
- [11]. Being an eyewitness, Nanak Singh penned *Khooni Vaisakhi*, capturing the tragedy and its aftermath. His *Khooni Vaisakhi* is a long book –length poem written in 1920. It was banned and destroyed by British government immediately in May 1920. Only one copy of the book reached England from where it was brought back to India in 1970.
- [12]. In 1977 Balraj Tah made a Bollywood movie *JallianwalaBagh* based on this play.
- [13]. Ratan Devi of the play was an actual living person. Her husband Chhaju Bhagat was shot in the massacre. Her story and painting is displayed inside the JallianwalaBagh museum. She sat overnight near the dead body of her husband. Later the story of her pain and suffering was recorded by JallianwalaBagh National Memorial Trust that controls the Bagh and its activities. Like Atar Kaur she too refused to take compensation offered by the government, saying that she wouldn't accept any help from her husband's murderers. For more details, see *Amritsar-Past and Present*, V. N. Datta, The Municipal Committee, Amritsar, 1967.
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- [15]. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
- [16]. *Ibid.*, pp. 155-156.
- [17]. Shahriyaar, *Jallianwala*, Nanak Singh Pustakmala, Amritsar, 2004.
- [18]. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- [19]. Arjan Singh Gargaj fought for country's freedom, enrolled himself in the Shaheedi Jatha to get outer wall of Rakabganj Sahib reconstructed. He served long term jails for his activities and participation in Kissanmorcha. He was also a famous writer. He wrote a book, "Do Pair Ghat Tuma".

- [20]. Atar Kaur was another eyewitness at the time of massacre. She was the widow of Shahid Bhagmal Bhatia.
- [21]. The child born was named as Sohan Lal Bhatia who actively participated in the National movement. He was compared with legendary character of Abhimanyu by President of India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad. He was honoured by President Giani Zail Singh and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Indra Gandhi. For more details, see [www.livehistoryindia.com](http://www.livehistoryindia.com).
- [22]. Punjabi Tribune, 13 April, 2019.
- [23]. Ibid.
- [24]. Babu Firoz Din Sharaf was born in Lahore in 1898. He wrote *Dukhan De Keerney* which was banned by the government in 1924.
- [25]. The sisters kept on waiting as the brothers like moon got brazen here. Translated by Rakhshanda Jalil, *JallianwalaBagh: Literary Responses in Prose and Poetry*, p. 189.
- [26]. Their graves will keep wailing the ones who lost their grooms here. Translated by Rakhshanda Jalil, *JallianwalaBagh: Literary Responses in Prose and Poetry*, p. 189.
- [27]. Giani Hira Singh Dard was born in 1889. He was a teacher by profession and later served as the secretary of Sikh League and Sikh Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee.
- [28]. To the brother gone to the fair, Sister kept on waiting. And for the remnant of her heart, The mother kept wailing.
- [29]. Do not leave me tonight, The wife left Whining. Translated by Rakhshanda Jalil, *JallianwalaBagh: Literary Responses in Prose and Poetry*, pp. 191-192.
- [30]. With the head on her husband in her lap Ratan Devi lay their crying. No one but she can narrate Whose night went enduring the death throes. Translated by Rakhshanda Jalil, *JallianwalaBagh: Literary Responses in Prose and Poetry*, p. 192.
- [31]. The echo of the moans From the Bagh Jallianwala Say Oh Hindi! You are still asleep But Ratan Devi is awake. Translated by Rakhshanda Jalil, *JallianwalaBagh: Literary Responses in Prose and Poetry*, p. 193.
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