Memories of Subjective and Objective Violence of Amritsar Massacre in Bali Rai's *City of Ghosts*[1]

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Abstract

Amritsar is a site of contestation and representation that always cries for a trajectory of resistance and protest against all forms of dehumanization and genocide perpetrated by the regime of terror and enforcement. The ferocious onslaught and assimilationist mentality of the colonizer silenced the colonized into dumb anguish of horror. Applying Žižek's theory of violence and Nora's notion of sites of memory, this paper seeks to explore how Bali Rai's heart-rendering tale *City of Ghosts* (2009) brings back the memory of black horror and unhealed trauma of soul-sapping scheme of random bloodshed engineered by Dyer and his Co. from the points of view of three young men, Gurdial, Jeevan, and Bissen Singh, through constructing the national memory of Amritsar as a patchwork of fact and fiction. I will also represent how this present fiction uses the ghostly figure of Heera who appears in each man's narrative to provide an alternative worldview from the perspectives of the marginalised.

Keywords: Resistance, Violence, Sites of Memory, Trauma, Dyer.

Introduction

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre alias Amritsar massacre is considered to be one of the most phantasmagorical experiences in the history of Indian politics because the warnings of Acting Brigadier Edward Harry Dyer to his fellow troops to hurl bullets from their Enfield Mark IV rifles into a large gathering of unarmed demonstrators butchered and battered the lives of at least four hundred people on the threshold of their undone years in an enclosed park on the auspicious occasion of Baisakhi of 1919. The historian Kim Wagner gives an example of this violence in his recently published book on Amritsar massacre thus: "the troops keep shooting and loading, shooting and loading, the piles of cartridges growing at their feet. The ground is littered with dead bodies, and a small girl is crying next to the bloodied corpse of her mother" (Wagner xv). The nation raised its voice in fierce protest and gave rise to secret centres of violence when open discussions and lawful movements bore no fruit. Even after one hundred years of this mass murder, we did not receive any formal apology from the British Govt., although Churchill, David Cameron and Theresa May expressed regret for this massacre or recently Archbishop of Canterbury felt ashamed

and sorry for the slaughter. The year 2019 marks the centenary of colonial atrocity in the Jallianwala Bagh, a deeply shameful event, an important illustration of cruelty towards utterly innocent civilians, a fatal parting of the ways between the Occident and the Orient that would never be mended (Datta 1). Illustrating the significance of a British apology in the centenary year, Wagner considers it as the British Raj's sentimental vision---"a vision in which the red blotches on the world-map are not blood but clusters of eternally grateful 'natives', and on which the sun stubbornly refuses to set" (Wagner 259). Applying Žižek's theory of violence and Nora's notion of sites of memory, I am trying to explore how Bali Rai's magical realist narrative *City of Ghosts* (2009), a tribute to Udham Singh, brings back the memory of black horror and unhealed trauma of soul-sapping scheme of random bloodshed engineered by Dyer alias 'Rex' and his "martial race"[2] (Singh *A History of the Sikhs*114) in 1919 from the points of view of three young men: Gurdial, a resident of the Central Khalsa Orphanage; Jeevan, Gudial's best friend at the Orphanage; and Bissen Singh, a former World War I survival soldier; through constructing the national memory of Amritsar as a patchwork of fact and fiction.

Žižek's Theory of Violence and *City of Ghosts*

In his short book entitled *Violence* (2000), Žižek differentiates between subjective and objective alias systemic violence by saying that while the former is considered to be visible because it is the immediate physical and psychological interaction with violence being carried out "by a clearly identifiable agent" (1); the latter is depicted as invisible because it describes the outcome of hate speeches, the various hierarchies embedded in our daily life of caste, class, creed, gender, race and the often disastrous results of the smooth working of our social, cultural and political systems (2). The main argument is that several forms of violence, be it the Amritsar massacre engineered by the imperialists or a series of bomb explosions on the soil of Ahvaz or political genocides during the Cultural Revolution in China or the political assassination of Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King Jr., are represented in such a way as to demand a subjective outlook in order to make out the contours of the framework which produces such violent acts (1). According to Žižek, a totalitarian regime has the fourfold functions: the Holocaust as the diabolical evil; the Stalinist Gulag System as the so-called truth of the socialist revolutionary mission; religious and racial supremacist fanaticisms; and the deconstructionist idea that the ultimate route of authoritarianism is the closure of all kinds of thought (Žižek *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?* 3-6). It is always the colonized, the oppressed and exploited, "parts of no-parts of every culture which come together in a shared struggle" (Žižek *Violence* 133-4) against the violence of the dominant hegemonic discourse of the totalitarian regimes.[3]

Set in the backdrop of a hotbed of the political scenario of revolutionary zeal and nascent nationalist movement for freeing the country from the foreign yoke, *City of Ghosts*

brilliantly transforms graphic realism, supernatural fantasy, the horror of the Great War, the chequered history of colonialism, and the perennial picturesque sight of the holy city into an ambitious narrative which deals with the trials and tragedies of the orphan duo Jeevan and Gurdial, be it Jeevan's commitment with a view to disrupting Colonial rule in the form of counter-violence or Gurdial's desperate yet seemingly hopeless attempt to marry a cruel millionaire's daughter, Sohni, and that their stories are interlinked with that of the kind Bissen, an opium addict and brave war veteran who defended the Colonial Empire in the Great War and who still bears with him memories of several forms of violence associated with the mechanisms of war. But the three men have drastically different and contrasting views on the political events taking place around them: Jeevan, intoxicated by the wine of patriotism or rather misled by the elixir of militant nationalism, fully commits to the idea of an independence struggle, and one which will inevitably involve counter-violence, but it is always clear that he is too naive to have a sense of the larger picture, and that the people such as Hans Raj and Pritam who have drawn him in are far more interested in killing India's enemies rather than their mission of independence. Following Gandhi's notion of *ahimsa*[4], Žižek considers this kind of revolutionary movements as "divine violence"[5] (Žižek *Violence* 178) because it performs beyond the boundaries of the moral, being directed by sympathetic savagery (189). Gurdial does not want to think about the cobweb of politics, and finds Jeevan's radical revolution utterly dangerous: "There were too many so-called rebels in Amritsar and Gurdial didn't want Jeevan caught up with them" (Rai 103). Bissan cannot make out the necessity of independence and contrasts two countries thus: "But at least the poor of England could eat. In India, to be the lowest of the low meant starvation and disease, and infant mortality was like a cancer, eating away at the very core of the country" (80).

The novel begins with a short description of Udham Singh's homicide of Sir Michael O'Dwyer in the Caxton Hall of London and ends with the ghost's words, telling Gurdial "The spirits of those who lie dead here today, they will not rest for a very long time…But one day Udham Singh will set them free" (384). Žižek never promotes the counter-violence of Jeevan or Bissen or Singh: "Those annihilated by divine violence are fully and completely guilty: they are not sacrificed, since they are not worthy of being sacrificed to and accepted by God---they are annihilated without being made a sacrifice" (Žižek *Violence* 198). As this novel reaches its violent climax, Dyer along with other colonial officials marches off towards Amritsar intending to destroy the peaceful gathering of innocent colonial people by forming a special force of armed soldiers with rifles, a group of twenty-five rifles of Gurkhas and twenty five-Sikhs and forty more Gurkhas armed with *kukris* because they "secretly consider themselves inferior" (Rai 73). As a representative of 1.5 million Indian soldiers in WWI, the maimed Bissen Singh describes the subjective and objective violence of the colonial soldiers (219), the inferior status of the Indian soldiers within the imperial hierarchy and depicts the brutality of a warfield as space where a young man is forced to kill another

young man in "a clash of underlying barbarisms" (Žižek *Violence* 150). In the hospital, a British representative asks a racist question: "And what exactly was an African donkey doing in England?" (Rai 274). As Žižek shows the violence of language thus: "In language, instead of exerting direct violence on each other, we are meant to debate, to exchange words, and such an exchange, even when it is aggressive, presupposes a minimal recognition of the other party" (Žižek *Violence* 60). Fellow colonial WWI soldiers express their protest to Bissen Singh about the domination of the white race against the yellow in general and about their positions in particular; one of them (Hurnam) resolving after the war to "take up my gun and help to chase these devils from my land" (Rai 305). It leads us to parallelism with *The Glass Palace* (2000) Ghosh's representation of several forms of violence upon the Indian soldiers in imperialist ideology with this difference that while the former depicts the traumatic condition of Indian soldiers in the WWI; the latter illustrates the violent memories of the WWII: "Their rule (Hitler and Mussolini) will be the most violent and despotic you can imagine, with some races at the bottom and some at the top" (Ghosh 255). Though more than forty-seven thousand Indian soldiers dedicated their lives in the battlefields, the wounded ones including Bissen did not have the privileges to reside in the country that they fought for in the bloodshed of 1914. The violence of war is also represented in Gurdial's experience when he sees dead bodies of young and old, male and female beneath his feet, "as the fog around him grew denser…..another smell---scorched metal and gunpowder---that stung his eyes and prevented him from seeing exactly what was going on" (Rai 379), thereby reminding us of the declaration against war by the anti-war poets that war is a shameless slaughter of mankind where youths grow pale, spectre-thin, and die with hopes unfulfilled. Rai describes the milieu of grotesque gothic gloom thus: "It was dark now and he was confused; momentarily lost until the smells and sounds of massacre flooded into his consciousness" (380).

The violence is symbolically manifested in the figures of the British officials and merchants, such as Dyer, Michael O'Dwyer, Miles Irving, Lieutenant-Colonel Smith, Rehill et al. They, like "the Nazi figure of the Jew" (Žižek *Violence* 55), play the divide and rule policy through their mechanisms of class, creed, race, and religion, thereby destroying India's spirit of unity in the midst of diversity. Their violent actions are best exposed in the arbitrary exercise of the power of dividing the Gold City into two sections by the politics of racism and shadeism, as the colonizer lived in posh areas of the old town, far from the overcrowded narrow lanes. Here Dr Satyapal, a widely respected leader of men, openly declares his protest against white men and gets a threat from imperialist soldiers in reply. According to these malevolent villains, India should make peace with their friends, fight with their enemies and save their soldiers from the debacle of maritime aggression in order to save their own country for the sake of peace. Even Kipling, like the biographer of the Butcher of Amritsar, praised Dyer as a sepoy by saying that Indians should learn from him,

as he led his team from the front: “He did his duty, as he saw it” (quoted in Collett 430). Apart from depicting atrocious imperial officials, this novel also glorifies Britain’s role in the First World War and highlights the dual role of colonialism and imperialism of the British Raj in the tug of war through the characterization of Bissen Singh. Apart from Žižek, here we can also cite Agamben’s explanation of Schmitt’s critique of the Sovereign as the one who holds the violent power to consider the state of exception as the state of emergency, in which the law of doctrine holds back without being revoked (Agamben 1-12) and that Agamben files charges against the American President George Bush of generating a state of exception through producing a circumstance in which “the emergency becomes the rule” (22).

Magical Realism as a Tool of Alternative Worldview

This magical realist narrative can be seen as a way of using both the magical figure of a ghostly woman (Heera) who appears in each man’s narrative to illustrate what is going on and realism of the deadly event in order to re-write an alternate version of official history and can be considered as a decolonizing agent to cover the vacuums of cultural delineation between the oppressor and the oppressed in this present scenario by recuperating the unheard voices of haunting traumatic violence from the perspectives of the oppressed. This mode of narration describes a hybrid space, a space in which the realm of reality and the world of magic co-exist with each other, to express the cultural aspects of authoritarianism which have been repeatedly disturbed by various forms of violence of the oppressor upon the common people (Boehmer 235). The present text negotiates the legacy of violence as a personal as well as a national trauma through presenting the tragic life of the mysterious woman in black, Heera, the mother of Sohni who was brutally killed by Darshan with the help of Gulbaru, and that the characters in this novel are ghosts, as they will be doomed to destruction in the carnage. Her appearance as a ghost--- “I’m not alive. I’m a ghost” (Rai 264) ---depicts how she became the victim of domestic violence, illustrating presence through absence and giving us an alternative worldview (Zamora 77). Žižek considers this kind of domestic violence as “symbolic violence” which illustrates the relationships between several forms of “social domination reproduced in our habitual speech forms” (Žižek *Violence* 1-2).But when Gulbaru whispers anxiously: “But we killed you”, Heera replies, “Yes, you did…But Love stopped me from dying” (Rai 264).

The repressed comes back to watch out and protect her daughter from the grip of her ogre-like father and describes her traumatic past, how her husband tortured her, how he with his bosom friends celebrated the birth of their first son while she lay in that curdled mess and ultimately how she was murdered brutally by the conspiracy of her husband and her secret lover: “Once Heera was dead, the two of them cut her body into pieces, and little by little, over the next two week or so, took them out and fed them to the stray dogs that roamed

the street" (256). Through her interaction with Bissen, he remembers how Lillian, a beautiful English nurse, took care of him and helped him recuperating from a shell injury in the army hospital set along the southern coast of England, and later fallen in love with each other against all the odds: "another memory crashed through him like the giant waves he'd had seen on his passage back to India. Lillian's face, her eyes, her smile" (100). In a monologue, she gives an account of the colonial oppression in her arrival to save Jeevan from his sure shot death on the ringing plains of the battlefield at the hands of the colonizer, thereby illustrating the condition of Amritsar: "Amritsar is full of ghosts, and there will be many more to come" (265).

Amritsar as a Site of Memory

What is the relationship between Žižek's notion of violence and Nora's idea of sites of memory? Both produce critical and theoretical discourses about the interrelations between trauma and memory, between institutional remembrance and personal knowledge of the violent pasts. The traumatic memories of violent pasts are not only inscribed into scars in people's body and mind but also embedded in several kinds of space such as war memorials, museums, pilgrimage sites, border territories and the like. Žižek in his seminal work notes: "The essence of the trauma is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe. All we have to do is to mark repeatedly the trauma as such" (Žižek *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* 272-3). We have to encircle repeatedly the trauma of Amritsar as a psychological space vested with historical importance in the violent memory of a nation, a phenomenological space in which memory plays a pivotal role and becomes "a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community" (Nora *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past Vol. I: Conflicts and Divisions* xvii). Taking a cue from Halbwachs's theorization of the "collective memory"[6] (Halbwachs 1), Nora also sets up the relationship between violent pasts and memory in his notion of sites of memory because memory leads us back to "its root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects" from various historical sites (Nora *Between memory and history: Les lieux dememoire* 9). The present narrative is a reconstructed vision of memory---the mental process of retrieval of information from historical situations, objects and figures of diverse interests which crowd the memory of the narrators in a state of fluidity, as Gulbaru's memory of spending so many sweet romantic nights with his sweetheart Darshana, Sohni and Jeevan's memory of losing their mothers during their childhood, Gurdial's *a la recherché e temps perdu*, Bissen's terrifying memory of killing many soldiers of the opponent group during First World War, and Heera's horrifying memory of her death at the hands of her husband and his secret lover etc. This novel structures its juvenile narrative through re-writing history vis-à-vis memory that brings absence into presence and describing the murder of O'Dwyer by the rebellious Udham Singh who also expresses his frightening memory of the massacre thus: "My waking

dreams are continually filled with the faces of those who died in the massacre.....It took the massacres to make me realize that she was truly gone" (Rai 190-191).

In this narrative, memory is two-dimensional---private and public. Public memory has something to do with the informal presentation of minor historical details in relation to the concept of the nation-state, based mainly on the newspaper reports, as in the following description: "Bissen Singh put down the newspaper and thought of all the men he had seen killed on the battlefield" (281). The forces of history, as they are visualized in this novel, represent the concept of vicissitudes---the rise and fall---the see-saw movement in the destiny of individuals and the destiny of the nation. In its depiction on the seamy side of war and its disclosure about the discriminatory behaviour of imperial warriors, this young adult narrative metamorphoses the golden city into a "city of ghosts", metamorphosing this brutal history of Amritsar into "sites of memory" (Nora *Between memory and history: Les lieux dememoire* 7) and "historical traces" (8). The interpretation of history which is encompassed by the novelist is rational and modern since the history of any nation is inextricably bound up with the destiny of individuals who remain very much the indispensable part of history. It may be said without any doubt that memory is a journey of the mind, the uninterrupted movement of the inner sensibility of the individual---the annihilation of the barriers of time and space---the exploration and exposition of the violent past, the re-discovery of its meaning in the mirror of the present, thereby performing the function of interlacing the different time contexts. For example, here Amritsar massacre brings back the traumatic memories of the Great War of Bissen leading him to the psychic horrors of the sullen hall in hell once again with the disturbing image of his fellow soldier, Rifleman Gobar Singh Negi, with the back of his head being severed, amid in the wasteland. The historian Kimberly Smith brings out an important point, "Memory (individual or group) can serve not only to falsify or recreate the past but to discover or preserve the *truth* about the past: to counter-historical narratives that misrepresent the experiences of oppressed groups" (Smith 523). Malgonkar's novel, *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964) also shows how the traumatic memories of the parents' murder in Amritsar massacre have led Shafi to join a terrorist group to free his motherland from the imperial grip.

Conclusion

As history deals with a series of accounts of the dead people, Derrida argues that the formation of history should be seen as an ideological construct whereby ghosts of the violent pasts refuses to be entirely stopped but remains to haunt the oppressor alias colonizer to avenge their deaths, thereby problematizing the negotiation between presence and absence, life and death, "of thinking the possibility of the specter, the specter as possibility" (Derrida 12). In this matter, we can say that ghostly subjects are those marginalized subjects which are the products of different forms of violence, depression and oppression, but they are

purposefully present through their absence. As we analyse the novels of Garcia Marquez, Harris, Rushdie, Morrison, Bhattacharya et al, we find that several historical facts are presented through their depiction of *abiku* or *ogbanje* or characters with supernatural powers and that those ghostly subjects can speak. Žižek, like Derrida, talks about the spectre and discusses the relationship between the spectre and its evocative power to bring presence into absence through insisting and striving toward existence (Žižek *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* 22). Such a ghost expresses heterogeneous temporality and builds up historiography as a form of haunting to unlock the core of closed historical chronicles to disseminate multiple forms of violence among the post-colonial studies reader. Since there is an interrelatedness between ghost and memory, narrative and subjectivity in postcolonial as well as postmodern literature, Bali Rai centres round the post-mortem of reviving the collective memory and cultural identity of his Sikh alias Punjabi communities through his description of the apparition's mystical appearance. I will argue, the "cultural memorization"[7] (Hirsch 21) of Amritsar massacre in this magical realist narrative, not only acts as a habitat for the main protagonists but also depicts as a site of memory to describe the violent pasts of the colonial era to modify and redescribe the past and shape the future continuously.

Notes:

1. A slightly different version of this paper was presented by the author in the International Memory Studies Conference hosted by IIT Madras, Dept. of Humanities and Social Sciences from 2 October to 4 October 2019.
2. Those section of people who were on the margin of Indian nationalism were considered to be 'martial race' (Singh 114-115).
3. Žižek notes, "Totalitarianism is the 'return of the repressed' of liberalism itself" (*Some concluding notes on violence, ideology and communist culture* 115).
4. Tagore also rejected any sort of violence because he was an ardent reader of the Upanishad (Bonnett 82).
5. Benjamin introduces the idea of "divine violence" to describe a sovereign individual who tries to disruptand destroy law in favour of justice (249-251).
6. Halbwachs in his thesis shows how commemoration provides collective memory of a historical event associated with the values and narratives of a particular group in a particular place.
7. M. Hirsch writes: "A reminder of unspeakability, a vehicle of identification, of cultural memorialization of post-memory and heteropathic identification, of cultural memoralization of a past whose vivid pain is receding more and more into the distance" (21).

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