
‘ONE THOUSAND SIX HUNDRED AND FIFTY ROUNDS’: COLONIAL VIOLENCE IN THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE JALLIANWALA BAGH MASSACRE

JOEL KUORTTI
University of Turku
juhkuo@utu.fi

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ABSTRACT

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar in 1919 paved the way for the independence of India and Pakistan. The paper looks at the narrative strategies of representing the incident in two novels that recount it, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*. How do these texts engage with the colonial political situation? How do the two writers see the repercussions of the incident for the time of their narratives?

KEYWORDS: Salman Rushdie; Shauna Singh Baldwin; Jallianwala Bagh massacre; colonial politics; narrative strategies; representation

RESUMEN *‘Mil seiscientas cincuenta balas’*. *La violencia colonial en las representaciones de la masacre de Jallianwala Bagh*

La masacre de Jallianwala Bagh en Amritsar en 1919 allanó el camino hacia la independencia de India y Pakistán. Este artículo examina las estrategias narrativas empleadas en la representación de este suceso en dos novelas que lo describen: *Midnight's Children* de Salman Rushdie y *What the Body Remembers* de Shauna Singh Baldwin. ¿Cómo abordan estas novelas la situación política colonial? ¿Cómo perciben estos escritores las repercusiones de este suceso en el contexto histórico de la narrativa?

PALABRAS CLAVE: Salman Rushdie; Shauna Singh Baldwin; masacre de Jallianwala Bagh; política colonial; estrategias narrativas; representación

The Road to Jallianwala Bagh – The Historical Context

After the Great War of 1914–1918, the British faced grave problems in subduing growing resistance in India. As the wartime Defence of India Act was becoming defunct, the British began to seek new measures to fight rebellion in the subcontinent and for this, a Sedition Committee was formed in 1918, chaired by Justice Sir Sidney Rowlatt. The Committee came up with two Bills of emergency measures, although ‘every non-official Indian in the Imperial Legislative Council’ voted against the Bills (Spear, 1965: 341). In the end, only one of the Bills actually

became law (Robb, 2004: 184). This piece of legislation, known officially as the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act and informally as the Rowlatt Act or “Black Bill”, became operational on 21 March 1919. The Indians were not deceived by this colonial legislative manoeuvre and they ingeniously recapitulated the sardonic spirit of the Bill: “No trial, no lawyer, no appeal” (Kulke & Rothermund, 1986: 283). The unjust and radical restriction of basic rights immediately aroused resistance.

Mahatma Gandhi was disappointed with the actions the British were taking and lost what was left of any desire to cooperate with the Government (Gandhi, 1999: 379–93). Consequently, he began to organize non-cooperation protests in line with his 1909 programme *Hind Swaraj*, a strategy which was to exert a long-term influence. Initially Gandhi did not regard the Jallianwala Bagh massacre as significant, writing: “Before this outrage [i.e. the Amritsar ‘crawling orders’], the Jallianwala [sic] Bagh tragedy paled into insignificance in my eyes, though it was this massacre principally that attracted the attention of the people of India and of the world” (393). Here Gandhi refers to an incident that took place one week after the actual massacre (see below), and it was this further humiliation that made him change his mind on the matter.

Two weeks after the passing of the Bill, on 6 April 1919, people all over India responded to Gandhiji’s invitation (383) to observe *hartal*, a day of mourning to protest against the Bill (see McLeod, 2002: 106). The protests were followed by violent outbursts all over the country. After the arrest of two important Punjabi Congress leaders, Dr Satyapal and Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew,¹ on 10 April, the public protests in the Punjab were spreading and in Amritsar a protest meeting was called in the Jallianwala Bagh compound for Sunday, 13 April (Collett, 2005: 232; see also Datta, 2004, on-line).

The Massacre and Its Representations

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 13 April 1919 meant death and injuries for hundreds of people in the Punjab. The British General Reginald Dyer, in charge of the city of Amritsar, had forbidden public meetings. An attack by a mob on a British missionary worker, Miss Marcella Sherwood (Collett, 2005: 234), provoked Dyer to resort to harsh measures in order, as he said,

¹ For more on Satyapal and Kitchlew, see Goyal 2004 and Kitchlew 1987, respectively. Similarly to Aadam Aziz in Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Kitchlew had obtained his Ph.D. from a German university (but from Münster, not Heidelberg).

“to give them a lesson”.² Dyer ordered his soldiers to fire on a crowd that had gathered in Jallianwala Bagh. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2005, on-line) sees the incident as an indication of race-consciousness on the part of the colonial military.

A week later, Dyer issued the so-called ‘crawling orders’ by which local people were flogged and made to crawl on their stomach on the site of Miss Sherwood’s attack (Lal, 1993: on-line; Collett, 2005: 269–93). In comparison to the 1857 Mutiny, historian Percival Spear comments that with the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, “a scar was drawn across Indo-British relations deeper than any which had been inflicted since the Mutiny” (Spear, 1965: 341). The tragic event had far-reaching consequences – for example Rabindranath Tagore renounced his British knighthood in the wake of the massacre – and it became a remarkable signpost on the way towards Indian independence.

This is the historical context of the episode that is described in the two works I will be discussing in this article. In his novel of 1980 *Midnight’s Children*, Salman Rushdie (1947–) depicts the Jallianwala Bagh incident in its violent details. Nineteen years later, in her novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999), Shauna Singh Baldwin (1962–) recounts the same incident as Rushdie.³ Both books attend to almost the same historical details, such as reporting the number of shots fired as *one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds* (MC 36, WBR 62).

Witness is borne to the traumatic nature of the massacre, not only by these works but also by numerous other Indian and British literary works and films in which the incident occurs. There is the Punjabi novel *Kall Vi Suraj Nahin Charhega* (1967) by Surjit Singh Sethi, which narrates the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy (Singh 1996) and in 2004 Santokh Singh Sheharyar brought out the Punjabi play “Jallianwala” (published by Nanak Singh Pustakmala; Walia, 2004: on-line). In his novel *The Day of the Scorpion* (published in 1968 as the second part of the *Raj Quartet*), Paul Scott (67–71) gives a brief account of the massacre and its significance (Scott, 1973: 67–71), and Stanley Wolpert’s ironically titled novel *An Error of Judgment* (1970) portrays the incident in a melodramatic way (Quinn, 2008: on-line; Bose, 2003: 65). The Hindi film *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002, directed by Rajkumar Santoshi) represents the events through a child’s perspective, while Richard Attenborough’s film *Gandhi* (1982, scenes 11 and 12) and the Granada Television

² “I was going to give them a lesson” (Copland 1990, 59).

³ Further references to the two novels will be preceded by MC (*Midnight’s Children*) and WBR (*What the Body Remembers*).

series *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984, directed by Christopher Morahan and Jim O'Brian, episode 7/14, "Daughters of the Regiment") also feature the massacre.

In this article, I will look at the similarities and differences in Rushdie's and Singh Baldwin's narratives: how do they engage with the colonial political situation in the light of the Amritsar massacre? and how do the writers see the repercussions of the incident for the time of their narratives?

Attention to Detail

In both novels, the brutal official account of the numbers – drawn from unidentified but parallel historical records – is pressed into the service of a critique of the inhumanity of modern warfare (see Collett, 2005: 262–63).⁴ We can see this when we compare what the two texts say about the actual reporting of the killing. First, Rushdie's description:

Brigadier Dyer's *fifty men* put down their *machine-guns* and go away. They have fired a total of *one thousand six hundred and fifty rounds into the unarmed crowd*. Of these, *one thousand five hundred and sixteen have found their mark*, killing or wounding some person. 'Good shooting,' Dyer tells his men, 'We have done a jolly good thing.' (MC 36; emphases added)

Now, Singh Baldwin:

[the carpenter] swore he heard an Englishman shout, 'Fire low!' And then he said General Dyer's Gurkhas really fired low, reloaded and fired again – volley after volley. *Fifty men*. And *sixteen hundred and fifty rounds*, they fired. I saw a few bullet marks in the walls where *those poor people* tried to climb over, get away. And the carpenter showed me [Papaji] where a bullet hit his home below the window he was watching from. No, *most of the bullets found their mark*. (WBR 62; emphases added)

⁴ The details are also recorded in the popular Internet source Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reginald_Dyer>.

Both writers mention the number of troops, the number of shots fired, and the accuracy of the shooting. They mention the *fifty soldiers* (although some sources refer to ninety) who fired into the crowd with their rifles. They also contrast the regimented soldiers with an “*unarmed crowd*” and “*those poor people*”. Rushdie incorrectly mentions machine-guns: these were actually brought to the site but could not be used as they were fastened to armoured cars which could not get through the narrow passageway leading to the compound. Later on Rushdie calls the guns used rifles: “R. E. Dyer might have commended his murderers’ rifle skills” (MC 37).

The Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress (*Punjab Disturbances*, 1976: 49) regarded it as customary for the colonial executive and military “to count Indian life very cheap”. Singh Baldwin agrees on this: “Only Indian lives are so worthless to them” (WBR 63).

Most of the gun-shots found their mark on their victims, killing or wounding them. Rushdie counts the number of victims as “*one thousand five hundred and sixteen*” (MC 36). There is a major disagreement among historians as to the actual number of victims. The original report on the incident by the Hunter Commission stated the numbers to be 379 dead and 1,200 wounded (Spear 341). These are also the figures Rushdie and Singh Baldwin refer to, although Singh Baldwin also lets her protagonist contradict the figures:

The English magistrate who comes here told me *less than four hundred people died* – he lies; *it cannot be*. These English don’t think we know or understand – of course we know, of course we understand. (WBR 63–64; emphases added)

Other sources refer to many more casualties – even over one thousand deaths (see Collett, 2005: 263). Collett (quoted in Roy, 2005: online) also comments: “As to how many died, I accept the final figure of the Sewa Samiti of 480 known named deaths, but suspect there were many not known. [...] I would not be surprised if the total deaths had been double that. The 397 accepted by the Hunter Committee (which investigated Dyer’s conduct) was wrong. As to injured, there is no way of knowing accurately. Over 1,000 easily”.

The sheer number of victims is devastating – and caused an immediate international scandal. The conflict between the colonial power and its subalterns is forcefully drawn. But it is not only this conflict that the stories seem to address. Nor do the narrations of the massacre, in

their rather faithful attention to detail, aim to challenge the existing information about the incident itself. They do, instead, try to interpret its meaning in new social and political environments, new historical contexts. I argue that the narrative conventions that differentiate the two authors' texts also emphasise their different contextual schemes. To clarify this, I will concentrate on discussing the issue of nation versus community in two parallel passages of the novels.

Narrative Interpretations

Before I go into the two issues themselves, let me first outline the basic narrative strategies to be found in the two novels. There is a remarkable difference between the way they engage in distancing or connecting the incident with the context of their characters.

Rushdie's story reads as a postmodern novel, with its metafictional structure. The narrative voice of Saleem Sinai is ironic and unreliable as he tells his story to Padma, his explicit audience. The narrative conventions used create a detached atmosphere. This can be seen in the scene where Aadam Aziz is handed a pamphlet calling for a meeting:

It had been inserted into his hand (we cut to a *long-shot* – nobody from Bombay should be without a basic film vocabulary) as he entered the hotel foyer. (MC 33; emphasis added)

Here, distancing happens not only through an external commentary but explicitly technically, through a description of camera movement: after a close-up it moves to a *long-shot*. This cinematic impression is emphasized by the present-tense narration: Rushdie's strategy is based on an understanding of constructedness and unreliability of discourse.

A further distancing method in Rushdie is the use of memory as a narrative technique. The accuracy of data is replaced by the suggestiveness of memory: "*Hartal – April 7*, agree mosque newspaper wall and pamphlet, because Gandhi has decreed that the whole of India shall, on that day, come to a halt" (MC 33) – here, the factual date of 6 April is replaced by the next day. Also grotesque irony is used for distancing: "On April 6th, 1919, the holy city of Amritsar smelled (gloriously, Padma, celestially!) of excrement" (MC 32). In his article published in the collection *Imaginary Homelands*, "Errata: Or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*"

Rushdie describes the way in which his narrative is faulty – both accidentally and deliberately. He says, for example that:

in the description of the Amritsar massacre [...] I have Saleem say that Dyer entered the Jallianwala Bagh compound followed by ‘fifty white troops’. The truth is that there were fifty troops, but they weren’t white. When I first found out my error I was upset and tried to have it corrected. Now I’m not so sure. The mistake feels more and more like Saleem’s; its wrongness feels *right*. (Rushdie, 1992: 23; emphasis original)

The corrected passage in the novel reads: “fifty crack troops” (MC 36).

In Singh Baldwin’s novel the setting is different. A Sikh family is gathered together in the evening to listen to the father, Papaji Bachan Singh, telling a story to his son Jeevan, with her daughter Roop listening. The story of the massacre is not told from the point of view of an omniscient narrator but as one heard from eye-witnesses – from a “carpenter who saw the slaughter from his terrace overlooking Jallianwala Bagh” (WBR 62) and an “old man [who] lost his only son and his two small grandsons in the massacre” (WBR 63). Furthermore, Papaji had himself just visited the scene of the massacre, nine years on: “I went through the passage into Jallianwala Bagh, you know which passage I mean, na?” (WBR 62).

Where Rushdie’s protagonist Saleem is ironically detached, Singh Baldwin’s Papaji is moved with emotion: in the course of his narration “Papaji’s voice deepens” (WBR 63) and at one point he “pauses for breath” (WBR 65). All this functions to convey a sense of realism: Singh Baldwin’s strategy is that of immediacy and reliability.

Nation and Community

The different strategies of the two texts position them differently with regard to the issues concerning nation and community. Rushdie’s narrative (here as in all his writings on India) emphasises the Indian nation, albeit in its multiplicity (see Kortenaar, 2003: 151). Singh Baldwin, for her part, represents India as segregated into separate, conflicting communal identities.

In *Midnight’s Children*, Aadam Aziz is an outsider in the scene of the massacre. He is a foreign-educated passer-by who anticipates “trouble from the military” because meetings had

been forbidden under martial law (MC 35). When the pamphlet about the *hartal* is pushed into his hand, he is hesitant:

Tai once said: ‘*Kashmiris are different*. Cowards, for instance. Put a gun in a Kashmiri’s hand and it will have to go off by itself – he’ll never dare to pull the trigger. We are not like Indians, always making battles’. Aziz, with Tai in his head, *does not feel Indian*. Kashmir, after all, is not strictly speaking a part of the Empire, but an independent princely state. *He is not sure if the hartal of pamphlet mosque wall newspaper is his fight*, even though he is in occupied territory now. (MC 33; emphases added)

Rushdie’s penchant for Kashmir shows in this quotation. A radical difference is constructed between the Kashmiris and the Indians. Aadam Aziz “*does not feel Indian*” and “*he is not sure if the hartal of pamphlet mosque wall newspaper is his fight*”. Nevertheless, despite this seeming communal thread, the basic outlook of Aziz – and Rushdie – concerns India as a whole – a whole that consists of a multitude of voices. For Rushdie, “the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd is by its very nature superabundant, heterogeneous, many things at once” (Rushdie, 1992: 32). To account for this, he writes of the people gathered in Jallianwala Bagh on the day of the tragic event: “On April 13th, many thousands of Indians are crowding through this alleyway” (MC 35).

From her side, Singh Baldwin connects the communal division directly to the colonial governance of the massacre:

after Jallianwala Bagh, the British had to agree that *each religion, each community*, should be represented in the legislature of each province according to the *number of its people*. So now, Muslims need more Muslims, Hindus need more Hindus, and *we Sikhs need more Sikhs*. (WBR 64–65; emphases added)

It is divide and rule: the British try to undermine the unity of Indians by positioning them one against the other – “*each religion, each community*” according “to the *number of its people*”. Earlier in the novel, Singh Baldwin writes: “Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, they are like the three

strands of [Roop's] hair, a strong rope against the British, but separate nevertheless" (WBR 16). Anti-colonial resistance is strengthened by the incident, but at the same time communal divisions are deepened. What emerges from her narration is the claim and simultaneous identification through the use of "we": "*we Sikhs need more Sikhs*". Where Rushdie speaks of "thousands of Indians" gathering in the Jallianwala Bagh, Singh Baldwin sees the gathering as a Sikh meeting: "Those people were *almost all Sikhs* who had come for the Baisakhi fair" (WBR 63; emphasis added).

However, contrary to Singh Baldwin's depiction, in his biography of General Dyer Nigel Collett (2005: 491n) states that of the 291 casualties whose *jats* (castes) could be identified most were Hindus and Muslims, and only 22 were certainly Sikh (see also Roy, 2005: online). The historical records are dubious, but whatever the 'facts' might be, here both Rushdie and Singh Baldwin interpret them from and for their own contexts.

Criticism of Gandhi

The other issue to be discussed briefly here is criticism of Mahatma Gandhi. Both authors take on a critical view of Gandhi in their narratives. Rushdie's national narrative celebrating multiplicity criticizes Gandhi for trying to homogenize India. Rushdie writes about the way in which the whole country took up Gandhi's idea of turning *hartal* into a nationalist project:

Hartal! Which is to say, literally speaking, a day of mourning, of stillness, of silence. But this is India in the heyday of the Mahatma, when *even language obeys the instructions of Gandhiji*, and the word has acquired, under his influence, new resonances. (MC 33)

The appearance in this passage of the otherwise almost totally absent Gandhi highlights the urgency of Rushdie's critique. Although elsewhere Rushdie (2000: 29) has referred to Gandhi as 'a sharp, crafty, streetfighting Gujarati lawyer who was a brilliant politician', the sarcastic comment on "*even language obey[ing] the instructions of Gandhiji*" is a reminder of the problematic relationship Rushdie has with Gandhi. This is confirmed in the following observation by Neil ten Kortenaar:

After Brigadier Dyer's massacre, [Aziz] is crushed under the bodies of the crowd, but because they have assembled in the name of the nation, he does not lose himself but finds himself. We must conclude that the distinction between a crowd and a mob is the distinction between the nation-state and the subnational grouping based on language or religion.[...] In the mob the self is lost; in the nation, however, it is confirmed. (Kortenaar, 2003: 151)

Singh Baldwin's narrative stressing Sikh communal identity, too, remonstrates with Gandhi's indifference to the Sikh sacrifice, nine years on from the massacre:

Nine years ago, I remember very well *Gandhiji protested* the crawling order and firing, and the deaths of the Sikhs who died there, just as he has protested other deaths since. But now? *It is a different time, now*. These Arya Samajis in Gujarkhan are trying to convert one Sikh at a time, back to being Hindus! *Gandhiji should stop them*, tell them they must understand that everyone should be allowed to follow the Guru and God of his choice. (WBR 64; emphases added)

Singh Baldwin's view is that even if Gandhi was originally understanding of the Sikh suffering, the immediate political situation later prevented him from taking action against an aggressive Hinduism that was trying to convert Sikhs 'back' to being Hindus.

Conclusion: The Inevitability of Colonial Collapse

The examples I have discussed here are literary echoes of colonial violence. When Rushdie and Singh Baldwin write from their post-independence contexts, they do so in retrospection. Their narratives are thus speaking not so much of the process of gaining independence as of the historical aftermath of colonialism. Singh Baldwin comes from the (diasporic) Sikh minority of Indians, and Rushdie from the (diasporic) Muslim minority of Indians. They both see communalism as a danger to Indian people. They show that colonial rule was ruthless and not in the least benevolent, trying to exploit the subaltern colonials and resorting to whatever measures might protect its interests. After the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Gandhi (398) gave this attitude the name of 'Dyerism' (1999: 398).

However, as postcolonial criticism has made evident, colonial power carried with it the elements of its own downfall. We may conclude with Dipesh Chakrabarty's words on the consequences of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre: "Such a moment when a challenge to the sovereignty of the colonial power has to be put down with violence always contained a contradiction that was necessary to colonial sovereignty" (Chakrabarty, 2005: on-line).

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