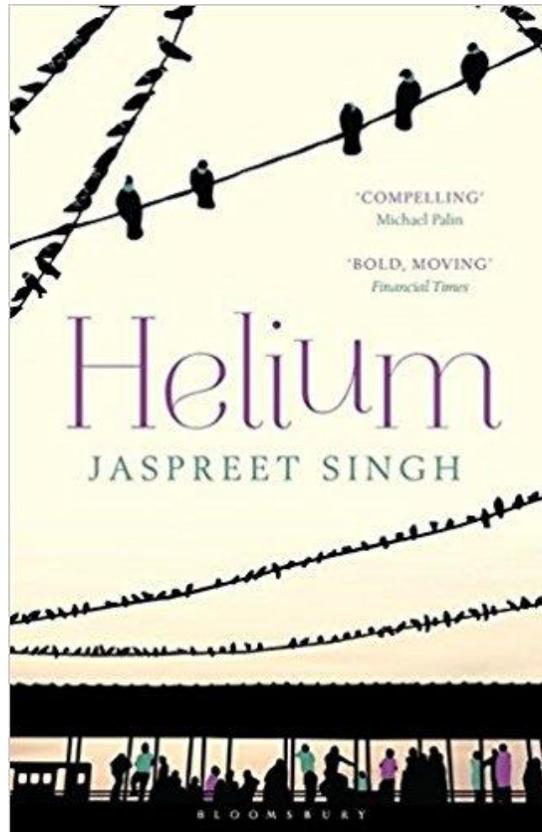


Dehumanizing Humanity in Jaspreet Singh's *Helium*

S. Zahira Banu, M. A., M.Phil., Ph.D.



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Helium-Jaspreet-Singh/dp/1408833875/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1526259114&sr=8-1&keywords=jaspreet+singh+helium

Abstract

Discriminating, marginalizing and subsequently dehumanizing certain sects of people had been a well-established tradition in India. The social stratification has become a norm in the present scenario also. This has eventually, caused havoc in the political, economic and educational systems of India. The novel *Helium* written by Jaspreet Singh highlights the trauma and the societal stigma experienced by the Sikhs in the aftermath of the assassination of the prime minister of India during 1984. This paper explores how the anti-Sikh pogrom executed by the Indian government transforms itself into a dystopic element.

Keywords: Dehumanisation, anti-Sikh Pogrom, marginalizing people, *Helium*, Jaspreet Singh

Angst of the Sikh Community - *Helium*

Literature remains a powerful medium to express one's opinions. The minorities, the suppressed and oppressed communities, use this medium as a platform to voice the agony and trauma they undergo due to the injustice meted out to them. Jaspreet Singh, an Indian born Canadian writer, attempts to bring to limelight the angst of the Sikh community through his second novel *Helium* (2013). The novel unfolds the haunting tale of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. The paper aims to analyze how and to what extreme the Indian government was a "dystopia" during 1984 by carrying out the anti-Sikh pogrom.

The novel *Helium* deals about the huge crime that took place in India in the year 1984, against the Sikhs. As a response to the assassination of the then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, by her body guard, anti-Sikh riots were organized in which it has been reported that "two thousand to eight thousand of innocent civilians were killed". (*Helium* 63) This most heinous crime was in fact carried out with the support of the central government by the Delhi police officials. *Helium* presents the haunting memory of the traumatic events that occurred right in front of the narrator's eyes. The narrator's professor was simply set ablaze for the only reason that he was a Sikh to which the narrator could only remain as a mute witness to the atrocity.

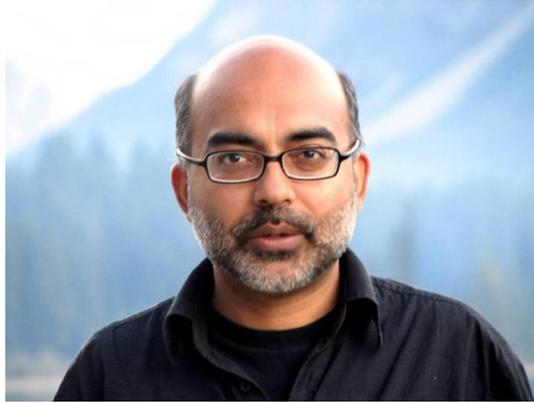
Arguments Against Killing Innocent People

The narrator sets the template for the totally misconstrued affair of generalizing that all Sikhs are terrorists or are responsible for the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi through describing the cause-and-effect correlations of two independent variables: "If the population of human babies, for instance, starts falling (in a city like Bhopal) and the population of black dogs starts rising simultaneously, it would be wrong to jump to the flawed conclusion: the dogs are responsible for killing the babies". (10) In a similar fashion the government related two unrelated incidents and instigated the mob to attack and massacre innocent Sikhs assuming that each Sikh had a vibrant role in the death of Mrs. Gandhi.

Raj the Narrator

Raj, the narrator, unravels the irony by narrating how his beloved professor Singh who actually condemned his student who expressed his anger, "Good, the bitch is dead" and revealed his concern saying, "...no one deserves to die like that. To disagree with someone doesn't mean you assassinate them" (29) is in fact burnt alive as he was a Sikh. The onlookers including the narrator were paralyzed and could only repeat the phrase "This is madness". (30)

Why Comparison with the Cosmic Element?



Jaspreet Singh

Courtesy: <http://metro.co.uk/2013/11/26/jaspreet-singhs-harrowing-novel-of-genocide-in-the-wake-of-indira-gandhis-assassination-4201439/>

While commenting on the title of the novel, in an interview to The Hindu, Jaspreet Singh told thus: “This ‘cosmic’ element has peculiar and very fascinating properties. For instance, Helium does not ‘burn’”. (1) But what pervade the novel are memories of burnt human bodies, smell of burnt tyres, human flesh, charred and devastated buildings. Memories cannot be burnt and hence, they stay alive in the mind of the narrator and keep haunting him. “As the jeep passed Tolstoy Marg I saw dozens of Sikh bodies on fire. Smell of burning wool and rubber tyres and human flesh. I saw taxis being smashed. And the black cloud of smoke touched the sky. This was our Eiffel Tower. This was our carnival. Our periodic table of hate”. (32) These lines talk volumes of the injustice the perpetrators poured upon a particular community and to the nation in general.

Government Officials and Policy Makers

The perpetrators were none but the government officials and policy makers. The police force was under the direct control of the central government and they joined hands with the congress party in executing the crime. Moreover, as a justification to this, Rajiv Gandhi announced “*when a big tree falls the Earth shakes*”. (34) The narrator’s father, a senior police officer, had a major role in facilitating the violence. It was disturbing and disgusting for Raj to think that his own father was an accomplice in the major massacre that took place. It was sickening for Raj to see the horror to believe it. He felt things happening to be unreal and he could not believe his own senses. His knowledge of chemistry and physics did not help him to extinguish the flames that burnt bright and engulfed his professor’s entire body.

Trauma

The few Sikhs who survived the riots were traumatised and were “transformed into silence itself”. (34) The prime motif of the mob who involved in the violence was not only “*khoon ka badla khoon...*” “Blood for blood”. (29) They also indulged in looting, raping, verbally humiliating by using obscene words, physically and emotionally humiliating. They spit on the Professor’s face called him names and finally slipped rubber tyres around his neck and set him ablaze telling “...you killed our mother ... now we kill you”. (30)

The Sikhs were attacked, killed when they were totally unprepared and were without defense. There are also instances in *Helium* of how the non-Sikhs made use of the opportunity to indulge in crimes of all sorts and let the Sikhs be blamed, accused and punished for no fault of their own. A Hindu boy from the IIT molested a Dalit woman in the guise of a Sikh. Those who knew this were unable to muster up their courage and report this matter. Besides, there were Sikhs who were panic-stricken to reveal their identity and hence, went to the extreme of clipping their hair and shaving their beard which was a painful act for them.

Memories Recur

Raj remains a mere witness to the madness that occurred in '84 but is unable to “unlive” what was “lived”. All the “scalded memories” recur “every day, every month, every year with its own chilling periodicity”. (39) Whenever he attempts to frame a plot by writing about the devastation, words fail to live up to its reputation. All he could do is to listen to the pain of others and he sensed their pain to be more intense than his. He knew very well it is impossible to “compare and quantify suffering”. (81) But, the more he tries to resist the more it becomes compulsive for him to express the anguish, and his otherwise numb fingers begin to move and he records his memories thus: “*For so many in '84 death began with rubber tyres... Sikhs were mere objects [of hatred] bonded to rubber tyres, offered to gods....*”. (80)

The ominous silence observed by distinguished public intellectuals, liberal secular writers and established academicians was intolerable to Raj. A volcano of questions erupts from his troubled mind:

“But why am I so shocked if thousands were murdered in Delhi? Why am I shocked if the ‘majority’ is unable to comprehend the enormity of its actions and the pain of the ‘minority’? Why does this pattern repeat itself over and over in the world? Why does the dominant group continue to represent itself as a ‘victim’? Bigger genocides have happened before. Armenian. Rwandan. Native American. Genocides will happen? Regarding this I am not sure. One can never be...Animals are much better, they don’t conduct genocides”. (81)

Deciphering the Past

In his attempt to exhume and decipher the past he achieves clarity.

After twenty-five long years, Raj revisits his professor’s wife Nelly, who works as an archivist and persuades her to tell her husband’s story. Nelly had lost her husband, daughter, son and brother in the catastrophe that took place in '84. It was immaterial for the mob whether the Sikh whom they killed had contributed for the freedom struggle or fought for the motherland with the neighbouring enemies. Nelly’s brother had won a Maha Vir Chakra, on the recommendation of Mrs. Gandhi, for having fought in the 1971 war with Pakistan. This same individual was dragged out of his house, doused with kerosene and burned alive. “... public buses and trains were used by the State to transport paid ‘mobs’. Voters lists were provided, and Sikh homes and businesses were marked overnight.... the mobs were given instructions-money-liquor-kerosene by senior leaders who belonged to the astonishing Congress Party....”. (219)

The irony is that, those who paid the mobs later appeared before the thousands of homeless and anguished Sikhs in the camps and provided them with relief material. Furthermore, such pogroms were justified by the ruling class to be “‘natural’, ‘spontaneous’, ‘legitimate’, ‘outbursts of anger’, ‘inevitable’, ‘logical’”. (222) This was the zenith of hypocrisy that existed in the largest democracy.

No FIRs could be filled against these criminals. Moreover, the Police stations functioned as places where rapes took place. “The justice system protected the criminals and punished the victims”. (170) Raj’s father who was an accomplice in the pogrom was rewarded with a gallantry medal. But, Raj does not want to hide this or distort this fact. Neither does he remain silent. He confronts him with the ugliness for which he was responsible. He makes his unreformed father read an article of a witness from the Newspaper and displays a black-and-white photo of three women victims of 1984. The inciters, instigators and facilitators of the pogrom were given level-Z security and they ran the country. Raj also gives a bag full of essential books like *When a Tree Shook Delhi*, *The Other Side of Silence*, *Who are the Guilty*, *November 84*, *I Accuse* and *Scorched White Lilies of ’84*, to his father. Finally, Raj has the courage in him to convey in a pointblank manner the grand crime story that his father had co-authored.

To Learn from the Past

In a review by David Evans it is mentioned that “Jaspreet Singh emulates WG Sebald in his deployment of caption-less photographs and a digressive style but harnesses these techniques to his own purposes.... The result is a compelling character study and a powerful meditation on historical forgetting”. Even the educational system has failed to teach the 1984 honestly. Hence, the author feels that “We must learn from the damaged pages of history”. (224) But, ironically, we fail miserably to learn from the past.

The riot of 1984 or rather the genocide of 1984 has not stopped the influential people and the ruling parties invariably executing such pogroms without an iota of humane feeling. In fact, the novel highlights references to the 2002 pogrom that took place in Gujarat, which was funded and implemented by the Hindu Party against the Muslims. Innocent victims like Nelly had to undergo unbearable rage and agony. Though they find the behaviour of ‘Dilli’-men despicable, they know how important it is to live in a city like Delhi. Life must move on in spite of knowing the bitter fact of how true history has been buried and only the ‘official version’ of it prevails.

=====

Works Cited

Evans, David. Helium by Jaspreet Singh; Lazy Days, by Erlend Loe. *ft.com*. Financial Times, 6 Dec. 2013. Web. 8 Dec 2013.

Sandhu, Amandeep. “A huge crime against humanity”. Literary Review. *The Hindu*. 10 Nov. 2013, 3: 1+. Print.

Singh, Jaspreet. *Helium*. Bloomsbury: New Delhi, 2013. Print.

S. Zahira Banu M. A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English
Sri Meenakshi Govt. College for Women
Madurai -625002
Tamilnadu
India
szahirabanu@gmail.com