

## Review

# What the body remembers: A feminist perspective of the Partition of India and Pakistan

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**The most predictable form of violence experienced by women is when the women of one community are sexually assaulted by the men of the other community, in an overt assertion of their identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the other community by dishonouring their women. Being extremely vulnerable women become easy targets of every form of oppression. This evil is further compounded if they are placed in unstable political societies or events. As in other moments of ethnic conflicts in the world, the rape and molestation of Hindu, Sikh and Muslim women before and after the Partition followed the same familiar pattern of sexual violence, retaliation and reprisal. It is an established fact that in all wars and holocausts it is women who have been humiliated, deprived and discriminated. The novel 'What the Body Remembers' taken up for study in this paper, projects the Partition from a woman's perspective which is the first ever attempt to view the Partition through the experiences of women. This novel on the Partition stands evidence to the statement that, 'since only women have undergone those specifically female life-experiences, only they can speak of a woman's life.**

**Key words:** Partition, women, victims, trauma.

## INTRODUCTION

"Like the flash of a supernova, the star of colonialism in India died in an explosion of internecine violence and bloodletting. Partition was the largest mass migration in history, the messiest national divorce-and also one of the quickest taking places in just a few months" (Akash, 2000).

What came to be known simply as Partition was a significant event in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Though, the life experiences and trauma of the Partition continued to be shrouded in a tyranny of silence for long, one can easily observe a different turn that the scholarly literature has taken over the years. It has become more nuanced and more attentive to those considerations that it had previously ignored or disregarded. There is a greater awareness for instance, of the manner in which women were affected by the Partition and its violence.

The scholarship of several women scholars and writers in particular has focused on the abduction of women and the agreement forged between the Governments of India and Pakistan for the recovery of these women.

Jill Didur feels that the silence found in women's accounts of sectarian violence that accompanied Partition

was "a sign of their inability to find a language to articulate their experiences without invoking metaphors of purity and pollution". She further argues that "these silences and ambiguities in women's stories should not be resolved, accounted for, translated or recovered but understood as a critique of the project of patriarchal modernity" (Jill, 2006).

In her interview in "Spincycle" Bapsi Sidhwa observes: "I imagine that as women, consciously or unconsciously, we bring out the problems and discrimination women face and project our aspirations" (Spincycle Interview with Bapsi Sidhwa via e-mail, 2007). However, being deliberately feministic, a woman writer essentially tends to depict the reality from the female perspective.

This paper discusses one such novel based on the lived trauma of the Partition titled *What the Body Remembers* by Shuana Singh Baldwin a second generation Canadian living in Milwaukee. The novelist expresses her impulse behind producing this novel by saying that it seemed to rise from a sense that there was something missing- a subject, a story, or an area that has received too little attention and *What the Body*

Remembers rose from that same dissatisfaction.

The Partition of India in 1947 into India, East Pakistan and West Pakistan has received academic attention, “but one can count the number of novels in English about it on the fingers of one hand. Adding to this, so far there have not been novels in English that put Sikh women front stage and certainly none that are about the experience of these women during Partition” (Shenoy, 2000 on <http://www.rediff.com/us/2000/feb/23us3.htm>). What the *Body Remembers* is the outcome of this dissatisfaction is reportedly the first English work looking at Partition from a Sikh woman’s perspective. It would be appropriate in this context to add the opinion of Gerda Lerner that says that women have been left out of history because we have considered history only in male centered forms. History would have been different if it would have been seen through the eyes of women and the values that they define. This novel is certainly a successful attempt in redefining the history of the Partition.

## THE TITLE

Explaining the concept of a body memory of the soul remembering past lives and experiences that the title of the novel suggests, Baldwin says that the belief in reincarnation has always been an aspect in various religions. “The idea of body memory and collective memory naturally follows beliefs in mind-body connection, and oneness” (<http://www.sawnet.org/books/writing/SSBBordersinterview.html>). Feminist criticisms written from the biological perspective, generally stresses the importance of the body as a source of imagery. Ideas about the body are fundamental to understanding how women conceptualize their situation in society; but there can be no expression about the body which is unmediated by linguistic, social and literary structures. “The difference of woman’s literary practice, therefore must be sought (in Miller’s words) in the ‘body of her writing and not the writing of her body’” (Nancy, 1980).

## THE THEME OF PARTITION IN THE NOVEL

The action of the novel takes place in West Pakistan—now called Pakistan—from the division of Punjab. When the British left India, the Sikh community in Punjab was caught in a struggle for land between the two major communities, the Hindus and Muslims. The novel brings to light, more particularly the attitude of the Sikh community towards British government and their sufferings which ironically they have never been allowed to forget.

The protagonist Roop is a beautiful sixteen years old girl, when she is married in 1937 to a man twenty five years her senior. She already knows that he has a barren

wife Satya but still agrees for the wedding. She is also confident that she will win over her husband Sardarji, and his first wife Satya, who is a proud and combative woman. The profound and multifaceted narrative traces the disintegration of India from 1928 to just after the Partition in 1947 through the lives of Satya, her husband Sardarji, and Roop her co-wife.

When Roop bears two children, Satya demands that the children should be given to her. In order to placate Satya, Sardarji compels Roop to agree, perhaps to overcome his guilt of being unjust to his first wife and perhaps also to project himself as a just and benevolent husband to both. However Roop does not comply and demands the ousting of Satya from the house. So, Satya, angry and heartbroken is left behind as the rest of the family moves to Lahore. Unable to bear the indignation and isolation she kills herself. Her spirit later permeates Roop, especially during her perilous journey with her children from Lahore in Pakistan to Delhi in India in search of safety.

Elaborating on the novel, one observes that the Partition between Satya and Roop in the story and their struggle to assert their rights on their husband and children in the house serves as an allegory to the partition of the nation and the ongoing political struggle. The story of marriage is used as a metaphor for the story of both exile and uprootment from one’s home with the meaning of home constantly evolving and changing for both women. As Anjana Basu puts it, “the novel explores the self-division that exists in India in which feudal and secular values try to make place for each other, much as Satya and Roop do in their husband’s house. It is a self-division that leads not only to the problems in the marriage, but culminates in the political violence of the country’s Partition” (Anjana, 2002 <http://www.sawf.org/newedit/edit03182002/bookreview.asp>).

The paradox of the British policies both sensible and inane and ultimately the intensification of religious fanaticism culminating in anarchy and bloodbath are depicted with sensibility worthy of appreciation. News and rumours of massacres and treachery travel from village to village as if on ‘Vayu’ the wind. Using ‘Vayu’ the wind as an innovative literary tool, Baldwin brings glimpses of political development from far away Delhi, Bihar and Bengal into her narration thereby imbuing the lives of the characters with an intimations of the impending convulsion. The intense terror of the Partition injured their sense of family, community and country and changed the world for them. “From the mudflats of Dacca, from Victoria Memorial in Calcutta to the red sandstones rampart of the Old Fort in Delhi, through refugee camps, whitewashed cantonments and police stations where tortured political seditionists can now be hailed as freedom fighters, tales reeking of death and horrors ride Vayu’s wings, and fly” (p. 429).

The novel certainly focuses sharply on the women in

such turmoil with the characters finding themselves in a part of Punjab that has suddenly become Pakistan. These fully formed and complexly drawn women characters enable the novelist to convincingly recreate the panorama of colonial India and the ghastly events of the Partition. Unlike her male counterparts like Khushwant Singh in *Train to Pakistan* and Chaman Nahal in *Azadi* the novelist challenges the projection of women as sexual objects and cultural symbols that grounds ethnic sexual violence. The novels of the male novelists on the theme of Partition are clearly patriarchal in their representation for having conspicuously missed women characters and their voice. Politics, economy, religion and even the social context is thought from the male perspective thereby displaying a dominant masculine ideology in operation.

### **A FEMININE PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN'S SOCIAL VICTIMIZATION**

The novel begins and ends with a soliloquy by the beautiful, shrewd and intelligent Satya. She is fiercely proud who mourns her barrenness "barren, but still useful" (p. 6). She manages Sardarji's whole estate and loves him despite his act of taking a second wife; "Satya cannot deny her love, but she will not flutter her eyelashes like Roop and pretend stupidity and incompetence to win his love" (p. 296).

She resents Roop for being young, beautiful and fertile and contempts her for being what she views as weak and compliant. She is very straight forward and outspoken; "a woman is merely cracked open for seeding like the earth before the force of the plough. If she is fertile, good for the farmer, if not, bad for her" (p. 8).

Her outspokenness discomforts and threatens Sardarji; by the way she challenges his words despite her relative lack of education. When a joyful Sardarji announces his promotion and posting she replies quietly, "this posting and your new position are another bone the British can throw before Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru, hoping to appease the non-co-operators and all the self-rule agitators, justify the blood spilled and pain endured by protestors" (p. 154). Elsewhere she argues: "I only see a better future when the English leave" (p. 247). "There is Hindu Raj coming when the English leave---Jinnah understands that....I understand better than you know...but some day you will remember my words" (p. 295) she tells Sardarji. Indeed, it was only after her death that Sardarji in many ways realized that what Satya had said was true especially about the ulterior and selfish motives of the British.

Baldwin does not project Satya in pure negativity. She has all reasons to be bitter and vengeful and behave the way she does for having being wronged: "Satya's haughty face knows no peace. In those grey eyes there is only fear, fear turning to hate, hate that radiates to Roop"

(p. 238). She becomes malicious once the sense of insecurity arises in her with the advent of Roop. Ironically, she endangers her own well-being by her independent opinions and gains very less from standing up for herself. She is left back alone in the ancestral house while Sardarji moves to Lahore with Roop and children. She felt betrayed and cheated that unsettles her beyond the extent of tolerance and forbearance. She is a kind of character who despite all her shortcomings and deficiencies evokes sympathy and admiration, especially at the stage when she is full of remorse and memories of her past deeds: "I am not a wife, for my husband has abandoned me. I am not a widow, for he still lives. I am not a mother....I am not a sister, for I have no brother. With no father...And so I am no one" (p. 308). It is then that she comprehends the solution to all her mental agony and pain. She realizes that she can "release" herself and go to a place where she can begin her life without fear, by her own choice and by her own will: "where women like her, prickly as cactus, shall not be abandoned and ignored. Surrender to death, tempter of all martyrs.....wake to the dignity that comes from refusal, refusal to live without izzat....subtract herself to solve the problem.... (p. 309).

She finds peace only after committing the most drastic act to win back her husband. She was confident that her death will remind Sardarji of his guilt, that she would make her presence felt by her absence and that they would realize that for a little more love she would still be. She could bear the withholding of love, of respect and attention but not indifference. "Sometimes we choose to die because it is the only way to be both heard and seen" (p. 460).

Once again Satya was right because if she dies, her presence remains to be so strongly felt by both Sardarji and Roop that we find Satya permeate their thoughts, actions and behaviour at every instance thereafter. Even the readers feel the impact of her presence as more powerful than before. Then follow the abstract sections of Satya's spirit: bold, proud and capable, speaking from a place between worlds as she waits to be reborn into another body. "again I am born a woman, ....remembers the good deeds and the bad, ...and I know, because my body remembers without benefit of words, that men who do not welcome girl-babies will not treasure me as I grow to woman....But men have not yet changed" (p. 470-471). Thus, the writer seems to comment on men through the character of Satya. More so, Sardarji is perhaps not given a name as he is typical of all men. The writer seems to suggest that all men are alike despite their apparent differences.

Roop was a dreamy, wilful and naïve girl who lived as a "guest" in her father's house before her marriage to Sardarji. She was deaf in one ear and she hides the defect so as not to spoil her prospects of marriage. She already attends to the basics of being a good Sikh (the five K's), later she learns the rules of being a good wife:

never say no, speak softly and never feel angry. She is a source of envy for Satya with her young body and most importantly her fertility. She lives only to marry and do 'what women are for'.

She is not just a good and sweet obedient daughter but ambitious, slightly vain and intelligent. It is this ambition combined with the fear of being left unmarried that prompts her for the marriage with Sardarji. Upon knowing the truth of her husband's age and a first wife she reacts thus: "then what is one more woman in a house where there are fifty people?" (p. 111).

Nevertheless, Roop is craftier than she appears and gets what she wants. She asserts herself as a strong woman who struggles with the expectations that the society has of her as a wife and mother. In the process of fighting all her life to be an obedient daughter and then a wife, Roop has learnt the value of modifying her outward appearance and behaviour and suppressing her rebellious thoughts inside. But the breaking point arrives when first her daughter and then her son are given to Satya. This pains her beyond her tolerance though she knows that she was married for this.

The pain that Roop experiences after she is separated from her babies does not belong to Roop alone but to all women who are the victims of this patriarchal set up where men cannot imagine a woman's world and have to be told of her pain in words. They are their father's children to do with them as they please and the woman who bears them is discarded, like an empty husk of no consequence. She believes that a "woman must choose the wisdom of lies over the dangers of truth" (p. 468). Thus, she dwells upon the unenviable position of women in the society.

Satya's death brings about an unknown and incomprehensible change in Roop: "Satya will live on in Roop, the way every older woman who uses a younger one is reincarnated in a betrayed young woman's body. Sister and sister they will truly be, the way they could never be while Satya was alive. Roop will be Satya's vessel, bearing Satya's anger, pride and ambition forward from this minute. She will contain her, woman within woman, hold her within. Like the Gurus, they might be one spirit, different bodies...Roop has changed, is more than her haumai, more than Roop. What Satya's body remembered has been felt for one long moment by Roop's and it will simmer, waiting some day to boil"(p 326). Satya's strong opinions, her strong will and her defiant attitude permeates Roop and imbues her with her courage and a more cynical and clear-eyed view of her situation and life at every step especially during times when she is caught in the violence of the Partition: "A strident voice uncoils itself from the shadows, shrill, defiant, unbowed---and it says to Roop clearly: don't die---Sardarji still needs you. Don't die like this, like a dog smeared on a dirt road. If you die, let death have meaning, let it be for a reason" (p. 418).

A major part of the novel is focussed on Roop as she

confronts the challenges of bigamy and then the larger trials created by the violence that accompanied the Partition. When Roop is fighting the panic and terror of searching for her family, who is dislocated during the riots and rampage, a familiar voice says clearly in her mind, "We are each alone, though a crowd of our quom might mill about us, little sister. Always each woman is alone. Roop looks around mystified, hears of "women abducted, mutilated, always by them ---never by us. Men etch their anger upon woman-skin, swallow their pride dissolved in women's blood" (p. 431). Poor women's bodies remember, all the time, through all time.

Baldwin offers a profound message and a learning point in this context, "Guru Nanak says that all men are born of women that the lineage continues because of a woman. The Guru says all women are valuable as princesses and should be called Kaur to remind men of it....she who gives birth to kings....there is none without her" (p. 330).

Sardarji is described as a little more than forty years old but healthy like a tiger. He is Oxford-educated, wealthy engineer and landowner, in deep conflicts with his Indian roots and the internalized values of his English colonizers. In contrast to the fiery Satya, the submissive Roop is a welcome relief to Sardarji. He chose Roop over Satya because Roop would listen to him admiringly and carefully while Satya had never lowered her eyes before him and carried herself far too confidently.

Caught between these two women he feels that women have mysterious ways of saying things and none are comprehensible. Satya's death comes as a blow to him and indeed as Satya had expected she made her presence felt in her absence. He felt as if truth had gone from the world. It was then that he realized her worth and the need of her good sense. He felt a shadow passing through his mind whenever there was a mention of Satya. Her 'isn't-ness' had been irking him. She continued to live in his mental realm---inaccessible and precisely because she was inaccessible. On the eve of Partition Sardarji once again remembers Satya, He wishes, "if Satya were here, she would tell him that, right to his face, the way only she knew how. She never held such truths back, that wife of his. How he misses her bloody-minded rebelliousness now; he has need of her spirit, prickly as cactus" (p. 397).

The portrayal of such strong women characters is an important aspect in the process of narrating the saga of such a holocaust as the Partition because men simply project women on to women the attributes of weakness and masochism. They tend to address their readers as if they are always men.

Surviving a ghastly and perilous train journey of the Partition riots Sardarji settles in New Delhi accommodating several refugees in his house. After witnessing the holocaust of the Partition he ceases to be the old Sardarji, a qualified man, but like any other turbaned men in Delhi, trying to swallow the grief and

rebuild their shattered lives.

### **A FEMININE PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN'S PHYSICAL VICTIMIZATION**

The family of Sardarji is effectively used as a trope to Partition. The vulnerability of women is brought out powerfully by Baldwin by focusing and blending the personal with the political and the individual with the historical. Sardarji can be viewed as the British who divided the Hindus and the Muslims in India in the same way as he divides Satya and Roop. The separation of these women is symbolic of the division of the country. Thus, Sardarji's family becomes the metaphor for the Partition of India and Pakistan.

The theme of Partition is like a volcano whose pressure mounts as the story progresses around all these themes until it finally erupts, engulfing all humanitarian values in it. Sardarji's manager Abdul Aziz narrated to him the tales of crushed skulls and slashed bodies of Sikh and Hindu shopkeepers, of Muslims tearing off the turbans of young and old alike, of making them eat beef forcefully, of pulled babies from their mothers' arms, of rapes, of temples being desecrated with cow's blood and of women jumping into the wells to save their honour.

Sardarji saw the destruction awaiting and felt that the Sikhs would be like the goats that Muslims sacrifice at Sadqa. After a careful analysis of the situation he concluded that he must forsake his treasured ambivalence and his greatest asset, and his ability to straddle cultures and colours must be curbed and restrained.

He decided to surrender his office in Lahore to Rai Alam Khan who was newly appointed chief accountant to the Pakistan Service of Engineers and leave for New Delhi to join his family, "Lahore is no place to be. A Muslim can pass for a Hindu, a Hindu for a Muslim. But we Sikhs with our turbans---we are such easy targets" (p. 398). Both Roop and Sardarji undergo death-defying journeys to reach the Indian border. He first sent Roop with children in a Packard hoping that no one would easily dare to stop a motor car while he decided to take the train with his servant Atma Singh. They travel amidst sten gun fire and petrol bombs tossed in Hindu and Sikh homes and shops, shrinking from every light, crossing paths smelling of death and urine, paths full of smoke from burning houses and finally reaching the railway station that was swarming with thousands of turbaned men like him, chunni clad women, and their children milling and clamouring before the train, desperate to flee.

Meanwhile the car in which Roop was traveling with her children, a maid- servant and the driver was stopped by Muslims. She feared of "dying young without ever reaching Delhi, about to be raped, mutilated like the woman whose breasts were cut off, or made to recite the Kalima" (p. 421). She managed the situation by trying to

look as haughty and commanding as Satya. Her maid Jorimon was attacked by a charged mass of men, grunting like animals in the dark. Roop pounded with clenched fists at the men as hard as she could. She punched and pummeled at the panting men, "with anger, pure heat of anger like molten steel within her" (p. 421). In those few minutes of terror Roop had learned that there are so many things men can do to women that are so much worse than death. Eventually, she succeeded in escaping.

Finding her way through the violence surrounding her everywhere Roop wonders in frustration, "Is this the India we fought for? She is like a woman raped so many times she has lost all count of the trespassers across her body. Who will rescue and pyre the bodies of my quom? What use now to be Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or Christian, what use the quom, the caste, the compartments that order our lives?" (p. 422).

When Roop reached the station to receive Sardarji, she "sank to her haunches with shards of eyes piercing through her veins" to see the train smeared with blood and windows smashed. "The silence of the slaughtered rises, palpable and accusing" (p. 436). Blood-curdling screams filled the air as those waiting for family, turned to wreak vengeance on the Muslim refugees waiting to leave. She feared Sardarji dead and lost her mental balance temporarily. She continued to wait for Sardarji for days witnessing every bloodied train from Lahore. She heard several news and stories of raped daughters, naked Sikh women forced by Muslims to dance before mosques or naked Muslim women forced by Sikhs to dance in the compound of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. "Everywhere on this platform, women pulled remnants of rags about the breasts- Satya would say they have learned shame, shame of their own bodies, from men of all faiths who cannot trust each other" (p. 432-434).

She could bear it no more and blood simmers to boil in her veins. In a state of unknown stupor she discarded all her clothes for everyone to see a woman's body without shame. She wanted to scream, "See me, I am human, though I am only a woman. See me I did what women are for. See me not as a vessel, a play thing, a fantasy, a maid servant, an ornament, but as Vaheguru made me... If a man does not lay claim to my body, the country will send someone to do so" (p. 436).

With the passing of days smell of death seeped into her pores but she waited still, waited till her eyes burnt in case she missed Sardarji's train. On the eighth day of her waiting, climbing stairs of hope to meet trains from Lahore and descending to platforms of death and despair she finally saw Sardarji emerging from the crowd. Sardarji said, "We must all keep our strength, keep our tears for bigger losses. This is only the beginning (p. 438).

The upheavals of the Partition are expressed in an admirably controlled narration. The novelist is

unobtrusively but deeply conscious of the truth that the trajectories of lives with or without such disruptions are always cruel, unexpected and appalling.

The other extremely heart-rending tale of victimization is of Roop's sister-in-law Kusum, who was found with each limb severed at the joint. Her body was sliced into six parts, then arranged to look as if she were whole again. But surprisingly the body had no signs of rape and no sign of self-defense. Jeevan, her husband was perplexed, "to cut a woman apart without first raping---a waste, surely. Rape is one man's message to another: I took your pawn. Your move." Jeevan continued to think what message could this be? Kusum's womb, the same from which his three children came, had been delivered and ripped out.

The message that he was given was, "we will stamp your kind, your very species from existence...this is a war against your quom...we take the womb so that there can be no Sikhs from it" (p. 447).

Ironically it was later revealed that it was none other than Jeevan's father, Kusum's own father-in-law who instead of handing over his daughter-in-law in the hands of the Muslims, put her life to an end. He could not endure even the possibility that some Muslim might put his hand upon her.

"Everyday I had been hearing that the seeds of that foreign religion were being planted in Sikh's women's wombs. No, I said: I must do my duty" (p. 455). Many women like Kusum were killed by their own kith and kin to save them from dishonour. Either way woman was the victim.

The description of the way in which Kusum silently accepts her death is still more distressing and agonizing. She did what she was told to and what Sikhs must do. There was no cry from her lips and she took off her chunni to bear the neck murmuring, 'Vaheguru, Vaheguru' as her head rolled from the stroke.... "I felt the warm splatter of her blood....I didn't know one woman could have so much blood inside her" (p. 455).

Kusum willingly went to her death just as she was offered it: 'for the respect of her community'. She represents millions of such women, all those daughters and daughters-in-law who always followed rule number one, of never saying 'nahin-ji' or 'no-ji' and who found their ways around and under their husbands or father's or brother's orders and directions in their real homes. The words nahinji or no-ji could not get past Kusum's lips because her lips had no practice in speaking them, because those words drowned before they took shape or sound, in the blood that she bore within.

Such aspects of the novel stand evidence to the fact that a woman's experiences include a different perceptual and emotional life and so they are able to express themselves by portraying characters or events with relation to exploitation, destitution, suffering and violence that the male novelists of this genre have failed to do.

## CONCLUSION

The novel is influential in drawing attention to the women's experience of the holocaust. Through these omen characters, the novelist makes visible the trauma, anguish, pain and ambivalence that marks the experience of Partition. This is the kind of sharp focus that is essential for depicting women in such times of turmoil. The novel is also an assertion of the women's spirit that is very pertinently portrayed through the disembodied voice of Satya that initiates and concludes the narration. This is a woman's perspective. Such writings become more intimate account of this most momentous event because it was women who suffered most. It is this intimacy of the victimization and portrayal of the female agony that makes such novels extremely powerful and renders the Partition literature so rich and multidimensional.

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