

Echoes of Partition: Embodied Memory and Fragmented Identities in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*

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Abstract

Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999) explores trauma through the pain associated with Partition of India and also delves into the construction of trauma as a deeply physical and psychological experience that leaves permanent impressions on women's bodies and psyches. The author presents devastating collective trauma of Partition through the perspectives of female characters whose bodies become battlegrounds for competing religious, political, and patriarchal forces. The novel reveals dehumanized historical accounts of Partition and emphasizes on the gendered dimensions of communal violence. This paper analyses multiple perspectives, embodied memory and the metaphor of body to illustrate fresh perspectives about Partition literature and trauma narratives, with particular attention to how historical suffering becomes inscribed upon the physical body.

Keywords: Partition, Narratives, Trauma, Memory, Gender, Violence.

Introduction

The British colonial rule ended in 1947 and the Indian subcontinent was divided into —India and Pakistan. This partition affected countless individual lives as they were shattered amid the new political demarcation of the borders. Official historical records have typically documented the diplomatic negotiations, boundary disputes, and migration, yet these accounts have overlooked the profound human suffering, particularly that of women who endured unimaginable violence during the upheaval.

Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999) offers an enduring peep into this cataclysmic period through the intertwined lives of two Sikh women—Roop and Satya. The novel saw the publication after more than five decades of Partition. Baldwin's work gives a new approach to the lingering psychological and cultural wounds written in the hearts and minds that continue to shape the identity in contemporary times. Baldwin has produced the novel by engaging with what scholars term "inherited trauma". Her efforts testify that the catastrophic experiences echo through subsequent generations, even when they are not directly witnessed. Drawing from the research on trauma, collective memory, and feminist theory, the novel *What the Body Remembers* has been analyzed on the ground that women's bodies are contested spaces where personal suffering intersect with political and historical forces.

Delineating Trauma in the novel *What the Body Remembers*

What the Body Remembers is a historical novel by Shauna Singh Baldwin, published in 1999 with the storyline spanning from 1937 to 1947 and is told through multiple perspectives and time frames. The novel revolves around Roop, a young Sikh woman navigating the tumultuous period in the history. The author weaves Roop's journey from her childhood to arranged marriage with Sardarji, a wealthy landowner who already has one wife, then finally moving to the violent upheaval of Partition. Novelist explores the themes of identity, belonging, memory, and survival on one side and on the other the themes of communal violence, displacement, and trauma that marked the historical period are delineated.

Irene Visser's article 'Decolonizing Trauma Theory'(2015) put forth the argument that trauma manifests differently across cultures, with varying expressions of grief, resilience, and healing that Western-centric psychological models may not fully comprehend. Baldwin's novel explores this gap through culturally specific bodily practices and beliefs prevalent during pre-partition times. The characters experience the trauma not as psychological factor but through embodied cultural rituals, spiritual practices, and bodily knowledge that offer alternative pathways for expression and offer healing from traumatic experiences. Kathy Davis in her book 'Embodied Practices'(2014) observes that women's bodies contain memories, histories, and wisdom that conventional epistemologies have systematically devalued. Studies of Partition survivors reveal how catastrophic violence transforms ordinary domestic routines into sites of both ongoing pain and potential healing (Misri, 2014). Baldwin's novel gives an insight into the traumatic violence women suffered during partition. What they bore during the communal violence was heightened poison of inhumanity that in small doses was injected in them in their everyday lives.

The novelist in a much meditated manner gives a glimpse of women in the pre-partition times. She has explored the inner and outer conflicts of the women. By giving the women- Roop and Sathya the central place in her narrative she tries to break the silence which patriarchal forces had imposed. A vicious pattern of using women as the 'honour' and reducing them to the non-existent entities is unearthed. Roop's family servant Gujri was the marriage present of Roop's mother like 'dowry's pots and pans' (Baldwin,21) In the novel Roop is told "Time will heal you" and years later Roop realizes the true meaning behind the saying-

" When women like Toshi says time will heal, they mean that time will heal not so the wound bleeds less, but so the bleeding becomes my habitual companion and only if it stops one day will I notice its absence."(Baldwin,213)

The novel gradually moves towards the most tumultuous events of the Indian subcontinent. There are vultures that hover over the dead bodies and there are men like vultures that are plundering the bodies of the women. The raped and mutilated bodies of women were used to prove the supremacy over the other religious community. When witnessing the aftermath of communal violence, Roop's body registers trauma before her mind can process it. After encountering a train filled with massacred Sikhs—one of the most infamous forms of Partition violence- Roop goes in search for her husband at Delhi railway station and sees people pouring with tattered belongings and women with torn clothes and honour stripped. She feels the pain and tears off her clothes "See me, I did what women are for. See me not as a vessel, a plaything, a fantasy, a maidservant, an ornament but as Vaheguru made me" (Baldwin, 488). The novelist universalizes the pain and helplessness of woman through Roop, signifying the need to be seen as human being and not as a commodity. This physical reaction—her tongue literally paralyzed—reveals how trauma manifests in the body when language fails. Some experiences prove so overwhelming that they short-circuit normal cognitive processing, emerging instead as bodily symptoms. Baldwin's portrayal aligns with contemporary trauma research showing how the body often "keeps the score" of traumatic events through physical manifestations (Rothschild, 2017).

Baldwin employs distinctive narrative strategies to convey how trauma resides in and speaks through the body. Her stylistic choices reflect the novel's thematic focus on bodily memory and the physical dimensions of historical trauma, offering alternatives to conventional historical records.

Women's Bodies as a metaphor of fragmented identities

The Prologue of the novel clearly depicts the plight of the women in undivided India 1895, the lines " here I am again... Born a woman... All I have in the life I live now is my Kismet: my wits and my will conjoined with my stars" (Baldwin,11). The author gives voice to the women by interrupting the silence that has become integral part of their personalities. When 16 years old Roop becomes second wife of oxford educated Sardarji who is in his forties because his wife Satya is unable to bear children. Roop is groomed to be submissive in order to be an ideal wife. She is taught that the destiny of a girl is secured if she has a husband and produces children. Both the women accept their fate and ironically Sardarji, the husband of two women despite his foreign education is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideas.

The novel's structure shifts between different female perspectives, primarily following Roop's first-person narrative while incorporating extended sections from Satya's viewpoint—even after her physical death. This narrative approach creates a conversation between different female experiences that transcends individual physical limitations. When Satya commits slow suicide by intentionally inflicting herself with tuberculosis, her consciousness continues observing events, representing a form of disembodied memory that nevertheless maintains connections to physical experience.

The commodification of women's bodies intensifies horrifically during Partition violence. Baldwin towards the last section of the novel depicts how women's bodies transform into symbolic territories where religious communities enact vengeance upon each other. Drawing from historical accounts, she portrays the systematic targeting of women through abduction, rape, and mutilation as deliberate strategies to dishonor enemy communities. In the novel there is a reference to the historical incident of Thoa Khalsa where around ninety Sikh women committed suicide—sometimes encouraged by male relatives—rather than face sexual assault from opposing religious groups. By depicting these events from the perspective of female characters, Baldwin forces readers to confront the terrible choices women faced when their bodies became battlegrounds for communal hatred. Roop's sister-in-law Kusum becomes the symbol of violence committed against the female bodies. Kusum's father-in-law Bachan Singh shares with Roop that he saved family's honour by killing Kusum. This incident of honour killing where Kusum was beheaded and her body mutilated made her a martyr in the eyes of society. Sacrifices done by Revathi Bua, Gujari and Kusum were expected because good women keep honour and family before themselves. The two words that get oft repeated are 'kismet' and 'quom' that justify the treatment of patriarchy in the novel. Women are culturally tuned to accept their fate and even be ready for the extreme sacrifice when their religious community is involved.

Satya's character provides another lens on bodily dispossession. Her name, meaning "truth" in Sanskrit, ironically highlights her erasure from family history when she fails to bear children. Her infertility diminishes her value in a society where women's worth depends primarily on reproduction. As cancer gradually destroys her body, Satya reflects bitterly on this second betrayal: "Her womb has never quickened with life, and now her body fails her again" (p. 302). Baldwin uses Satya's illness as a metaphor for her displacement within a changing society—her body consumed from within just as her position as first wife erodes with the arrival of the fertile Roop.

Even as her physical form deteriorates, Satya's consciousness persists through the narrative, suggesting that bodily memory transcends physical boundaries. This spectral presence challenges conventional understandings of embodiment while highlighting how women's awareness continues even when their bodies are destroyed by violence or disease. Baldwin's novel powerfully illustrates how traumatic experiences leave lasting physical imprints that persist even when conscious memory falters or deliberately suppresses painful events. The title itself—*What the Body Remembers*—underscores this central theme, suggesting that our physical forms retain traces of experiences our minds might prefer to forget.

Baldwin also explores how trauma passes between generations through embodied rituals and practices. The novel depicts domestic traditions—cooking techniques, grooming rituals, religious ceremonies—that transmit cultural memory through physical gestures and sensory experiences. When learning traditional cooking from her mother-in-law, Roop connects to a lineage of women through shared bodily movements: "So many women's hands have done this before mine, Roop thinks. So many women have fed their men, their children" (Baldwin, 211).

This moment illustrates how everyday physical actions become vehicles for cultural continuity, linking women across generations through shared bodily knowledge. These embodied traditions provide stability amid historical ruptures, preserving cultural identity even as communities are violently displaced from ancestral lands.

Baldwin's novel challenges conventional accounts of Partition by presenting this historical cataclysm through the intimate bodily experiences of women. By focusing on female characters' physical and emotional responses to unfolding political events, the narrative offers a distinctly gendered perspective that contrasts sharply with official histories dominated by male political figures and abstract geopolitical concerns. On seeing the communal violence Roop reflects "Is this India we fought for God—chosen or Godforsaken? She is like a woman raped so many times she has lost all count of the trespassers across her body..." (Baldwin, 476). The novelist makes a parallel between the women and the motherland in these lines.

The novel further shows how nationalist rhetoric appropriated women's bodies as symbols while denying them agency as historical participants. Be it Roop's father Bachan Singh, her brother Jeewan Singh or her husband Sardarji their perspective represents the dominant male nationalist viewpoint that treats land, religion, and women as interconnected possessions requiring protection or sacrifice for community preservation. This shows how nationalist and religious ideologies become embedded within women's consciousness, leading them to destroy themselves rather than face "contamination" by religious others. Baldwin presents this not as heroic sacrifice but as a tragic consequence of patriarchal values equating women's bodies with collective honor. Simone De Beauvoir's in her book *The Second Sex* (1984) stated 'One is not born a woman but becomes one' through this statement she dismantled the role of patriarchy by revealing that women are biologically un equal to men and through this the ground of injustice and inequality become natural. Baldwin in her work has proved this concept in more than one ways stating that women saw themselves through the eyes of patriarchy and those who are a rebel like Satya are destined to die alone.

Conclusion

What the Body Remembers makes a vital contribution to Partition literature by emphasizing how historical trauma becomes imprinted upon the physical body. Through its portrayal of women whose bodies bear witness to violence, displacement, and loss, Baldwin's novel challenges conventional historical accounts while preserving experiences that official narratives have often neglected or silenced. The body functions as an alternative historical archive—one that records and preserves experiences through sensations, gestures, and physical markers that persist even when conscious memory fails or deliberately suppresses traumatic events. By attending to these bodily archives, Baldwin recovers women's histories that might otherwise disappear from collective memory.

The embodied perspective offered by What the Body Remembers holds significant implications for understanding both trauma and its literary representation. It demonstrates that truly engaging with traumatic histories requires attention not just to political events and ideological conflicts but to how these forces impact actual human bodies—particularly marginalized bodies that official histories have traditionally overlooked.

As the temporal distance from Partition grows and direct witnesses pass away, literary works like Baldwin's novel become increasingly crucial vessels of embodied memory. By inscribing women's physical experiences of Partition into literary form, Baldwin ensures these perspectives remain present in cultural memory, challenging readers to develop more inclusive and physically grounded understandings of historical trauma.

In the years since its publication, Baldwin's novel has taken its place among the most significant literary works addressing the Partition experience. Its focus on women's bodies as sites of both violence and resistance offers readers a powerful framework for understanding how historical traumas continue to reverberate through communities and across generations. By recognizing the body's capacity to bear witness when other forms of testimony fail, *What the Body Remembers* enriches the understanding not only of Partition history but of how traumatic experiences become inscribed in flesh and memory.

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