



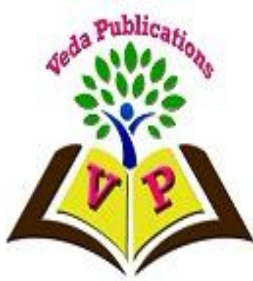
## SUBALTERN ASPECTS IN SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S *WHAT THE BODY REMEMBERS*

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### ABSTRACT



Subaltern is a word in post-colonial theory coined by Antonio Gramsci that commonly designates and identifies the colonial populations who are socially, politically, and geographically excluded from the hierarchy of power of an imperial colony and the metropolitan homeland of an empire. In the 1970s, the word began to be used as a reference to colonized people in the South Asian subcontinent. The Postcolonial feminists examine parallels between recently decolonized nations and the state of women within patriarchy in terms of the relationship between a marginalized subgroup and the dominant culture. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes in her celebrated essay "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*", "If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow." (82-83). This article focuses on the protagonists of Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999) as "subaltern", and they are oppressed and silenced by the hegemonic structures of the British as well as of the Indian patriarchy.

**Keywords:** *Subaltern, Post-Colonial, Decolonised, Oppressed, Patriarchy.*



Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* has at its backdrop the partition of India at the time of independence, which has emerged in recent years as a thematic pursuit for both literary writers and scholars. Baldwin says in an interview with Rich Rennicks via e-mail that she did not set out to write a partition novel at first but the allegory between the personal story of Satya and Roop, the two women in the polygamous marriage, and their rivalry for children, which grew naturally into political. This statement recalls Fredric Jameson's observation in his thought-provoking essay "*Third world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism*" (1986) that "the story of private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public in third-world culture and society." (320). The discursive power to modulate the personal into public, this article believes, is an allegorical in narration and it is a strategy of immense epistemic empowerment of female-self in the contemporary (postcolonial) fictional narratives by women since it assigns to the female-self a legitimate space in history or the narrative of the nation. In *What the Body Remembers* Baldwin employs the female body as a metaphor as well as a metonymy, which help the personal narrative of woman to be allegorized into a narrative of the nation, and invest with it a power of resistance to critique the narrative of the nation and history that have been constructed by men.

*What the Body Remembers* novel set in pre-partitioned India, mainly Punjab. It is the story of Roop and Satya, co-wives of a Sikh engineer called Sardarji, and also it is an allegorical tale of the partition of India. As Satya, the first wife of Sardarji

bears no children, he takes a younger wife, Roop, to have a son. The country is torn apart by the events leading to the partition, as is Sardarji's family by the conflict between the women. Thus, the narration of the relationship of the two co-wives, strained by mutual incriminations, becomes an allegory of the discontent of the two nations, India and Pakistan, "married to one conqueror" (407). The realistic and allegorical narrative modes that the writer employs transform individual experiences into collective experiences. She also transcends the private and public polarity on behalf of a "nationalist" narrative which is evident as the public enters into the private life of women.

Widespread violence against women's body was witnessed at the time of the Partition of India. Urvashi Butalia in her book *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) in which Baldwin has acknowledged her indebtedness in writing *What the Body Remembers* – writes that "some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, forcibly impregnated by men of the 'other' religion" (45). Women jumped into wells to drown themselves to avoid rape or forced religious conversion; fathers and brothers beheaded their daughters and sisters and other female members of the family so that they would not fall prey to dishonourable fate. Thousands of women were 'martyred' to 'save' the purity of the religion. This is the reason why Urvashi Butalia metaphorically titles one of the chapters of her book as "*History is a Women's Body*," showing how history was played out on women's bodies during the Partition and how women became passive, suffering subjects of history and hence subaltern bodies. Subaltern because researcher believes that women were not the agents



of the bloodied history, nor were they able to claim recognition of their corporeal suffering and even 'martyrdom'. Historical accounts by male historians have rarely addressed this dark underside of the history of partition.

A few remarks about the role of allegory in postcolonial theory are worth mentioning at the moment. Stephen Slemon who coined the term "post-colonial allegory", in his essay *Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History* (1988) writes, the postcolonial allegory departs from our conventional understanding of the allegory as a "constrained and mechanical mode" of representing history, as it is involved in "displacing [history] as a concept and opening up the past to imaginative revision" (165). In the postcolonial allegory, Slemon goes on to add:

Whatever the specific tactic, the common pursuit is to proceed beyond a "determinist view of history" by revising, reappropriating, or reinterpreting history as a concept, and in doing so to articulate new "codes of recognition" within which those acts of resistance, those unrealized intentions and those re-orderings of consciousness that "history" has rendered silent or invisible can be recognised as shaping forces in a culture's tradition. (158)

Here, the researcher believes that *What the Body Remembers* fits this postcolonial allegory schema as it raises questions about the authority of the past through imaginative revisions of history. By providing alternative visions and versions of the past from a Sikh woman's view of partition, the novel produces a "counter-discourse" (Slemon 11).

Baldwin's novel has a great capacity for intervening in the masculinity nationalist discourse and historiography via the belated remembering and retelling of the collective trauma of Partition through the body as a means of such remembrance. That is why the body, and particularly the woman's body, assumes centrality in thematic terms in the book. What remarkable is that the novel presents the aggression on and by individual and community not as an upshot of the time but as a memory from past ages. What the body does remember, according to Shauna Singh Baldwin, is not only individual memory of the characters, but also group or collective memory. She used the concept of collective memory when she explained to Ben Patchsea the title of *What the Body Remembers* in an interview that in addition to what Roop remembers, "the title refers to ancestral memory, collective memory/the subconscious and how it feeds our fears, appropriate or not. Fear then influences our actions, especially when the State sanctions violence by promising not to hold anyone accountable" (Feb 2, 2011).

'Collective memory' in Baldwin reminds one of Toni Morrison's uses of "rememory" in *Beloved* (1987). Morrison uses the word rememory to mean the act of remembering a memory. When Sethe (one of main characters in *Beloved*) explains rememory to her daughter Denver, she states,

If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place- the picture of it- stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think about it, even if



I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. (*Beloved*: 43)

“Rememory” differs from “memory” in its active force independent of the rememberer. It can be shared. Thus “rememory” as a trope hypothesizes the interconnectedness of minds of past and present generations and thus helps comprehend the “collective memory” of which Baldwin writes. Baldwin writes of people moving across India, “moving not in hope of freedom and independence, but from the fear, their bodies remember from other ages.” (*What the Body Remembers*: 447) Roop’s brother Jeevan says that he has discovered in the army that it is not only, as the English believe, Sikhs, Gurkhas, and Marathas who can fight, “but all men whose bodies remember humiliation and anger from this and past lives.” (*What the Body Remembers*: 174) “Sardarji’s body remembers life- preserving fear, passed down centuries in Lori rhymes his mother sang him, in painting displayed in the Golden Temple Museum in Amritsar, in the poem and the story” (*What the Body Remembers*: 345). The role of stories, whether in painting, poetry, or other oral narratives, then, is to consolidate a particular viewpoint. It helps perpetuation of communal memory in face of forgetting. Stories, it is observed in the novel, ‘are not told for the telling, stories are told for the teaching’ (*What the Body Remembers*: 64). The act of story-telling is important for Baldwin as well as her protagonist Roop as it gives the author as well as her character a voice, lets them break out of the silence they have been conditioned into.

Roop too protests with her body. Her transformation from a child-wife into an independent self is complete when she has stripped off clothes on

the railway platform at Delhi amidst mayhem and bloodbath of partition only to make others see ‘a woman’s body without shame’ and ‘as no man’s possession.’ She wants 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 plaything, a fantasy, a maidservant, an ornament, but as Vaheguru made me.” (*What the Body Remembers*: 498) In this connection, Ashok K Mohapatra rightly says, “Roop’s exhibitionism is a protest against dishonour both the communities of Hindus and Muslims have perpetrated upon woman’s body by ironically inscribing on it the brutal sign of triumph and honour of their nations” (71). Ironically enough, although a woman as a human being and an individual is not considered important, she draws catches attention – at times lewd – primarily as a body. Even when she is looked upon as a social being, she does not set the terms of defining others in social relations. On the contrary, she gets defined by others and in terms of her relationship with men in the family, community and, nation. That’s why Roop sees in a dream on the eve of her journey to Delhi, “Men stand watching by the roadside . . . (they know) whose mother I am, whose sister I am, what religion I am, even if they don’t know my name.” (*What the Body Remembers*: 421) However, the act of parading naked, which is a bold act on Roop’s part, helps her overcome the fear of her body (“that lure of lust from the eyes of unrelated men”) and the event helps Roop claims herself albeit in a mode of ironical self-mockery, suggesting that the independence of the new nation-state is a farce.

Both main characters Roop and Satya protest and they are transformed. But Roop’s sister-in-law



Kusum becomes a passive victim of history without claiming recognition. She was killed by her father-in-law and became a “martyr” to save the so-called purity of the religion and the community. When Roop’s brother Jeevan tells her how he found his wife Kusum’s body chopped up, her womb ripped out, ‘his story enters Roop’s body,’ and this phrase conveys not only horror of the listener, but the fact that the horror has become a kind of genetic inheritance: ‘this telling is not for Roop, this telling is for Roop to tell his sons, and her sons.’ (509) Roop’s punning determination to ‘remember Kusum’s body, remembered’ (*What the Body Remembers*: 515) makes the body a site of collective memory and history, or rather her story which gives voice to unvoiced memories, hidden secrets, and painful silences.

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