

Interrogating the Female Textual Body in *What the Body Remembers*

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Abstract

The female textual body ascribes the female body more worth than a mere biological object and explores the masculine perception of evaluating women in relation to their body as ‘vessels of fertility’ needed for sustenance of individual families and collective humanity. This research paper explores the female protagonists in Shauna Singh Baldwin’s novel *What the Body Remembers* as symbols of female textual body in the discourse of gender.

Keywords: Female Textual Body, Gender, Feminism, Shauna Singh Baldwin, What the Body Remembers

The feministic discourse analyses how bodies of women were construed as ‘aesthetic commodities’ maintained to represent women as epitome of fertility needed for the sustenance of human race in a male dominated society. The female textual body concerns how female protagonists are enabled by their bodies to entice men into matrimony which in turn ensures them availability of material means to live. The discourse also examines how the feminine body influences a woman’s sense of self and identity. Thus, the female textual body as presented in the narratives ascribes the female body more worth than a mere biological object and explore the understanding of a woman as her body.

Shauna Singh Balwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* describes the sensuous female protagonist Roop in a feministic perspective which places particular significance on the female textual body. The novel narrates the violent saga of partition of India through the plot of *What the Body Remembers*. The narrative discusses the issues of gender during a period when women witnessed a traumatic epoch of history which they survived under the shadow of men. The narrative exposes the trauma of women who endured displacement, brutality, abduction, trauma, physical abuse and even prostitution, questionably as the worst victims of the Partition.

The story narrates the tale of the middle aged Satya, a matured woman who is barren and does not have any children. Her husband, Sardarjee a wealthy Oxford educated, Sikh landowner marries a second, younger wife, Roop, who can produce heirs. The narrative interrogates the gender conditioning and exposes how women are treated as 'breeding machines' for producing male heirs who would carry forward the family name.

The uncomfortable relationship between the two co-wives, their rivalry and struggle for prestige mirrors the situation in the country where an internal struggle ensues between Hindus and Muslims while the British prepare to divide the country. The struggle for supremacy between Roop and Satya brings a catastrophe and the family is divided as Satya kills herself, while Roop, her children and husband manage to cross the border and reach the newly independent Indian state. The narrative relates the history of partition allegorically through the domestic story of strife.

The narrative interrogates the inadequacy of conventional records of history and questions what establishes history on female body. The saga interweaves traumatic history, politics and fiction to retell the gory saga of partition through particularly the suffering of female characters significantly in the context of their female bodies.

Satya whose name means ‘truth’ ironically dies in the story and remains perpetually furious and discontented. The narrative begins and ends with a soliloquy by Satya who is annoyed for being born as a girl child and agitated further that she has been reincarnated once again as a girl. It is apparent that the birth of the same female soul destined to live the same story. The plight of being a female for whom history is more a matter of the memory of physical suffering and brutality rather than of historicising on the basis of the truth and evidence is apparent in the narrative. Satya whose name means ‘truth’ dies in the narrative while Roop lives on to witness the agonies of being a female.

Roop whose name means ‘form or body’ is a beautiful, young Punjabi girl. She faces gender discrimination as a young child when her brother Jeevan is given preferential treatment over his sisters. Roop wants to escape the fate of her mother, who died during child birth but is ironically married to Sardarjee, who marries her to produce heirs for his family. Roop’s father cannot afford a good dowry and the proposal of getting married to a wealthy man though middle aged and married does not put her off .

She is stronger and more ambitious unlike her mother who remained in *purdah* and didn’t step outside the confines of her *haveli*. Her paternal aunt imparts her the rules of conventional behaviour for women which includes grooming to make girls docile such as agreeing with elders, speaking softly, and never feeling angry. She grows up into a pretty well-bred girl, a perfectly suitable for fulfilling her role as a bride.

Roop serves as the epitome of the feminine body which is revered as the vessel for sustenance of generation. She appears to be a happily married woman blessed with children who is in no dearth of material comforts, however, on a more profound note she nothing more than a subservient woman who sustains the family line in a world dominated by masculine vigour. She poignantly bears the pain of giving away her children to Satya and struggles to find her place in the house where she is dominated.

Roop's predicament metaphorically connects with the philosophical views of Simone de Beauvoir as described in *The Second Sex* which suggests that the binaries of Self and the Other can be ascribed to the male and female. The male Self has traditionally been associated with the mind which is more elevated, sublime and transcendental; while the female Other lies trapped in the body, associated with the biological processes of menses and childbirth and therefore defined and gauged by bodily functions, shape, and size. The narrative of Roop seems close to the tenets of female textual body as she is primarily perceived as a 'vessel' or 'container' to bring forth new life.

Roop and Satya represent two aspects of womanhood – the mind and the body. Satya is an equal match for her husband, in whom he finds a perfect companion. Roop's role in her husband is defined by that fact she bestows sons who are considered crucial for continuation of the family name. The narrative compares Satya with Draupadi and Roop with Sita and hints at that partition of India is in fact merely a continuation of the history, the mythologies and the legends of the land before it was even named India. The issue of trauma faced by women is narrated by Satya in the following lines:

Surely there will come another time when just being can bring izzat in return, when a woman will be allowed to chose her owner, when a woman will not be owned, when love will be enough payment for marriage, children or no children, just because her shakti takes shape and walks the world again.(Baldwin, 362)

Despite the fact that a woman can contribute to social regeneration as much as to the cause of family welfare, she became a victim of social prejudices and male chauvinism. Both Satya and Roop are so different in their personality and character, yet live under the same fear and insecurity. The traditional web of culture and history that restricts their freedom but, at the same time, offers them protection. The status and predicament of women in Indian society and outside has been yet another motivating force for the author with a social

purpose. This exploration of patriarchy, and the conflict it catalyses within and between women, transcends a new world in her fiction. The narrative is imbued with a feminine soul which painfully reiterates that a woman's body is the tabula on which the history of a nation and rules of a patriarchal society are inscribed.

The women through their personal agony retain the memories of their relationships of the past. The narrative thus relates to – ‘what the body remembers’- as a community, as a human being and most importantly as a woman. Touch, physical contact of body to body, is central to the narrative and showcases the complex play of touch within diverse structures of the society such as caste, religion, migration and partition.

The novel constructs a motif of ambivalent evidence across the testimonials of men and women to challenge the projection of violence in the narrations by men. The male narratives are distorted towards women and gendered violence within the family. The re-narration of these accounts of violence through Roop suggests how violence for women is received by women the future listeners and re-narrators. Particularly, the death of Kusum in the narrative represents the trauma of countless women who were killed by their own people to save the honour of the family and community. During partition the bodies of women bore the numerous scars of violence and sexual assaults. The bodies of women became masculine revenge sites for members of different religious communities. The disfigured body of Kusum which is mutilated after being raped symbolizes the very soul of the Sikh community quartered into pieces. The women pass the scars borne by their bodies to the women of future generations. The mutilation of her womb symbolises the destruction of very existence of woman who is worshipped as divine vessel of fertility and creativity, the basis of creation and sustenance of life. The traditional image of partition which relates to the cutting land into three parts West Pakistan, India, and East Pakistan is allegorically associated with the dismembered bodies of the women in the narratives of violence.

The female textual body is well characterised in the narrative through different characters. When Roop is forced to give up her first baby to Satya, she tells the little girl to remember the taste, smell and touch of her mother's body. (Baldwin, 189) When she is forced to give up her second baby, she kisses the soles of his feet, so that when he is a man his body may remember "the mark of this stolen moment" .(Baldwin, 231)

The 'bodies' of women characters are frequently associated with the idea of acting as reservoirs of brutal memories. Roop has her body inscribed in the wrong language when the bangle- seller tattoos her name on her inside wrist in Urdu. Although that saves her life years later during the Partition when she is attacked by a Muslim gang. Much like the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh girls all alike, Roop begins to fear her own body due to the growing violence towards women, "that lurer of lust from the eyes of unrelated men" (Baldwin, 112). After getting married, she is expected to learn the rules made by her husband towards her own body: that she must not wear a bindi on her forehead, vermilion powder in the parting of her hair, or a nose ring, and that she must clean her teeth with toothpaste and toothbrush. She is expected to read her husband's body language- "the twitch of a muscle, the lift of an eyebrow, the curl of a moustache, the flick of a wrist" (Baldwin, 199). As a mother too she is expected to read not only her baby's little body (Baldwin, 182)

Satya who is barren wants children for her husband and "needs Roop for what Roop's body can do" (Baldwin,171). However, though presented allegorically as the intellect in contradiction to Roop's association to the body, Satya too by no means utterly bodiless. "Satya's body remembers for her and it tells her to be daring in ways she could never contemplate before" (Baldwin, 298).

Both Roop and Satya share the agony and share the same fate as women. During Satya's last moments Roop empathises with her and feels the same sentiment which Satya's body remembered. Roop's outlook towards Satya evolves towards a transcendence which

reaches a climax when she stripes off her clothes and exposes her body on the railway platform at Delhi only to make others see ‘a woman’s body without shame’ and ‘as no man’s possession’. Roop’s exhibitionism is a protest against dishonour towards women irrespective of cast. She revives her dejected and disillusioned husband to hopefully begin a life again in New Delhi.

The narrative begins with the description of how a soul begets the body of a girl child and closes with how it begets another body of a girl child. The body of the girl child remembers all the atrocities of the previous birth, and recognises that it will have to suffer them again. The women of all ages and all religions share a similar saga which the narrative represents collectively as the female textual body of its characters.

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