



**International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)**

*A Peer-Reviewed Monthly Research Journal*

ISSN: 2394-7969 (Online), ISSN: 2394-7950 (Print)

Volume-II, Issue-VII, August 2016, Page No. 107-111

Published by: Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.irjims.com>

---

## **Metaphorising the Body in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers***

**Pinky Sarma**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Silchar College, Assam, India*

### **Abstract**

*One of the most potent techniques used to portray the extreme violence meted out to women in the partition narratives is the use of symbols and metaphors. Body represents the archive of suffering which tells the miserable stories of how female bodies become territories bearing the signs of triumph and the marks of defeat as well. This paper will make a study of Bladwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* (2000) and show how violation of female bodies may generate multiple metaphorical interpretations.*

***Key Words: Shauna Singh Baldwin, Partition, Female Body, Metaphor.***

---

The cultures of all times and places have always been fundamentally preoccupied with the body. From the time of ancient myths like Ramayana and Mahabharata to the contemporary age of computers, body [especially female body] has been conceptualized as a biological object and as ideas embodied in one's mind. Sometimes body is a metaphor of 'chastity' and sometimes a "territory to be conquered" (Menon and Bhasin 43). "Presence in the world vigorously implies the positing of a body that is both a thing of the world and a point of view on this world..." (Beauvoir 24). Nevertheless such existence of the body as a material object and the point of view it provides is acquired differently by women and men. According to a cognitive scientist, George Lakoff, "metaphor appears to be a neural mechanism that allows us to adapt the neural systems used in sensory-motor activity to create forms of abstract reason...Anything we can think or understand is shaped by, made possible by, and limited by our bodies, brains, and our embodied interactions in the world". Lakoff further says in the conversation that "our bodies and what we do with them differ significantly from culture to culture" (Brockman 1). In this paper there is an endeavour to discover a link between female bodies and the metaphorical message they produce in the context of Partition.

The most common form of violence women experience in the period of any political unrest is "when the women of one community are sexually assaulted by the men of the other, in an overt assertion of their identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the Other by "dishonouring" their women (Menon and Bhasin 41). In times of religious or ethnic

conflicts the usual patterns of violence and retaliation are abduction, rape, sexual abuse, murder, and mutilation. Jill Didur theorises that the silence about the experiences of sectarian violence found in the writings of women writers materializes from their inability to find a language to communicate their experiences. She further states that the fictional representation of partition where women tell their stories, it almost becomes a ritual to articulate the extreme violence meted out to them by invoking the metaphors of 'purity' and 'pollution'. The reference to the ideas of dishonor and shame as put forward by Didur "critiques the patriarchal logic of a "cultural system that dictates that rape signifies a woman's shame and the dishonor of her male protectors" (Didur 126). This practice of deification of women besought early practices like 'Sati' (women burnt alive on the pyres of their husbands) and 'Jauhar' (self-immolation practiced by Rajput women to save their honour against their captors) as means to purge the defiled female bodies. Paradoxically violence performed on female bodies began to be deemed as a means to retain the chastity of the body. Susan Bordo in her critical essay "From Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body" states that "body is the metaphor of culture" that is, body becomes a concrete medium through which culture inscribes and reinforces its norms (Bordo 1)). Bordo says that the rules of femininity have come to be transmitted through the visual images and behavioural presentations which she calls "bodily discourse" (Bordo 1): how women should dress, move, express, talk, and behave. Bordo also uses the term Agoraphobic (extreme cultural sex-role stereotyping of women) to typify the intricacies and inhibitions of behaviour female bodies are subjected to. In Baldwin's novel there are repeated references to such pleasing utterances like "achchaji", "hanji" and "yes-ji" (100) that the girls of Pari Darwaza are taught to please their elders (specially the males).

A significant observation is made by Butalia in regard to female body representing the national honour. The suffering of women is rooted in national culture and gendered nationalism. There are ancient myths where motherhood is best realized when dedicated to the cause of the nation as begetters of heroes; wifehood is acknowledged when used as the strength of the heroic husband or sacrificed for the dead husband as *Sati*; womanhood is marked in the idealization of *Shakti* (Tripathy 1). These myths have congealed into the Indian cultural imagination the icon of nation as mother. Throughout the national movements one of the most powerful symbols for mobilizing men and women had been the image of India as the mother or 'Bharatmata'. Butalia offers an outstanding example from one newspaper: "One issue of the *Organizer* (August 14, 1947) had a front page illustration of Mother India, the map of the country, with a woman lying on it, one limb cut off and severed with Nehru holding the bloody knife" (Butalia 186). The story of Roop's sister-in-law Kusum in Baldwin's novel becomes vital for understanding the partition violence. Kusum, who is married to Roop's brother Jeevan, an officer in the Indian Army is a perfect "Sita" (97). She does everything that she is told to do. When their Muslim neighbours begin rioting; Papaji, Kusum's father-in-law tells her to be ready for his knife. He decides to kill her and she too readies herself to be sacrificed for the honour of her community. Kusum's killing by Papaji becomes an honour-killing. She prefers death to the dishonor of rape and conversion. She becomes a martyr, who sacrifices herself for the greater cause of protecting

her community's honour. This concedes the fact that most Hindu and Sikh women became targets of the men of their own community. Butalia's oral testimonies show how the Sikh survivors of the partition took pride in the mass-killing and mass-suicide of their women-folk. One of the interviewees in Butalia's testimony retorts the idea of fear as a dissuading factor in the sacrifice made by the seventeen women and children of his family. In his words, "*The real fear was one of dishonor. If they had been caught by the Muslims, our honour, their honour would have been sacrificed, lost. It's a question of one's honour...if you have pride you do not fear.*" (Butalia 195). Thus the partition of the nation was a metaphorical violation of the body of the mother Earth implemented through the actual violation of the female bodies. In *What the Body Remembers* the description of Kusum's dismembered body "sliced into six parts, then arranged to look as if she were whole again" (575) metaphorises the territory's partition on the one hand and the community's self-legitimization on the other. Papaji [Roop's father] thinks that for good-good women death should be preferable to dishonor. He kills Kusum so that her body does not get violated by the men of the other community. Unaware of his father's actions, Jeevan returns to his father's home and discovers the body of his wife Kusum that has been dismembered, rearranged and placed beneath a white sheet. He thinks... "Why were her legs not bloody? 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'" (576). Jeevan understands the arrangement of the limbs after ripping out the womb from her body. Kusum's severed body bears the message that, "Independence and its dark 'other', Partition, provided the rationale for making women into symbols of the nation's honour" (Butalia 192). Thus body becomes the metaphor for the nation's partition. Baldwin herself claims that "the metaphor of the 30s and 40s in undivided India was the body - the country as body, woman as womb for the tribe. And the story (of Partition and loss of the country's "children") is what the whole country remembers as part of its creation story, its birth pangs" (Interview 1).

Body also acts as the archive of memory in Baldwin's novel. Body re-members the communal violence acted upon them. Women have a unique way of re-membering violence through images of reproduction. Their bodies become sources of imagery through which they internalize what their bodies are meant for. Szymanski, Moffit and Erika Carr in their insightful article "Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory and Research" write that "women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use by others. Sexual objectification occurs when a woman's body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire." (Szymanski & Moffit 2-3). At various points in the novel, women are reminded that having babies [reportedly sons] is "what women are for" (42). Woman is seen as the metaphor of earth in the words of Bebeji, "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" (12). This stringent patriarchal ideology brings death to Roop's mother at child-birth as she tries to deliver yet another child. This also results in the fertile Roop's entry into Sardarji's household as his first wife Satya's nemesis and eventually leads to Satya's rejection for her barrenness as an additional offence to her already disapproved

jealousy, quarrelsomeness and obstinacy. Thus it remains a fact that if this ideology of remembering women's bodies in terms of reproductive capacity restrains them in their everyday life; it also renders them vulnerable in times of communal violence. Towards the end of Baldwin's novel, the women of Pari Darwaza meet their most tragic fate. They are sorted out for various kinds of violence according to their reproductive potential. Kusum's violated body stands not as an embodiment of suffering she must have gone through but rather it is the insult of the Sikh community that her violated body represents. When Jeevan discovers her dismembered body; her limbs cut and separated and her womb removed, he interprets the ripping out of kusum's womb and leaving of the empty shell as a sign of emasculation of the valiance of the Sikh community.

The feminist intervention of the metaphorical interpretations of violence of the 'female body' lays bare the complexities of male ideologies. Such metaphorical implications in Baldwin's novel sometimes serve to foreground the misgivings with which Roop endorses the stories of sacrifice made by Kusum and the other women of Papaji's household. Kusum's laying bare her neck to Bachan Singh's knife, metaphorical of her 'sacrifice' may not be interpreted as her consent to death. This is however, evident from Bachan Singh's recounting of Kusum's willing acceptance of death. As Kusum prepared herself for the beheading, he says, "she turned her back, so I should not see her face, took off her chunni to bare her neck before me. And then . . ." Here Bachan Singh's grief is intensified as a reminder of the affective complexities underlying male self-constructions of victimhood. Roop's aunt Revati Bhua, unmarried and past beyond her reproductive years could be allowed to be handed over to the rioting mob and Gujri, a working-class poor woman could be abandoned amidst the turmoil for the convenience of the male members of Bachan Singh's family. Nonetheless among all these sacrifices only Kusum's sacrifice is elevated to an act of heroism. She becomes the metaphorical Sita, who is first disgraced, then defiled and then deified to be martyred.

**Conclusion:** Baldwin's novel portrays a complex array of violations that a female body undergoes in the context of the Partition. Each kind of violation enacted upon the female body becomes the source of imagery for her to understand her predicament in the society. The violated body is either an embodiment of idealized woman (wife/daughter/mother) and/or the upholders of male honour. This paper explores how female bodies become metaphorical in conveying multiple social meanings and how these meanings shape gendered experience.

### **Works Cited:**

1. Baldwin, Shauna Singh. *What the Body Remembers*. New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 1999. Print. Beauvoir, de Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany Chevallier.
2. London: Vintage, 2010. Print.

3. Bordo, Susan. *From Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. 1993. Web. 15 May [www.wayanswardhani.lecture.ub.ac.id](http://www.wayanswardhani.lecture.ub.ac.id)
4. Brockman, J. "Philosophy in the Flesh" A Talk with George Lakoff. 2001. Web. 20 April <[www.serbal.pntic.mec.es](http://www.serbal.pntic.mec.es)>
5. Butalia, Urvashi. *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. Delhi: Viking, 1998. Print.
6. Didur, Jill. *Unsettling Partition: Literature, Gender, Memory*. New Delhi: Dorling Kindersley Pvt. Ltd, 2006. Print.
7. Menon, Ritu and Kamla Bhasin. *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998. Print. <[www.serbal.pntic.mec.es](http://www.serbal.pntic.mec.es)>
8. Szymanski, Dawn M., Lauran B. Moffit and E.R.Carr. *Sexual Objectification of Women: Advances to Theory and Research*. 2011. Web. 16 May <[www.apa.org/education](http://www.apa.org/education)>
9. Tripathy, Anjali. *History is a Woman's Body: A Study of Some Partition Narratives*. 2014. Web. 19 April <[www.shaunasinghbaldwin.com](http://www.shaunasinghbaldwin.com)>