

What the Body Remembers

If you had predicted that I, a second-generation Canadian living in Milwaukee would write a book set in colonial India, in the area that is now Pakistan, about a Sikh woman in a polygamous marriage, I would have said, "Me?" But this novel chose its writer. Its characters, two women and a man, their husband, demanded that their story be told.

Roop is a young Sikh girl of sixteen and when she is married to a man twenty five years her senior in 1937, she knows he has a barren first wife, Satya. *What the Body Remembers* begins with the first meeting between Roop and Satya, and Satya decides that Roop is going to be a child-bearer for her. Then the novel goes back to Roop's early life and takes you all the way through her wedding, follows Roop as her children are given to Satya. Then comes 1947 and with independence from the British, the partition of India into India, West Pakistan, and East Pakistan. (The line that became the initial border of the two countries and over which lives are being lost even as we speak was drawn by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, a Britisher who'd never seen Punjab. When the British left India, they formed West Pakistan--now simply called Pakistan--from the division of Punjab province where the novel takes place, and East Pakistan from the division of Bengal. East Pakistan broke away with another war in 1971 to become the country we now know as Bangladesh.) In the tradition of the Sufi allegorical story, the story of the marriage becomes allegory for what happened to the whole country. As the Hindus and the Muslims fought, minorities like the Sikhs were caught in the middle, and the conqueror, the British, got away scot-free. (Or did they?)

I can count novels in English about Partition on the fingers of one hand. So every story about Partition fills a huge gap in the universe of possible narratives. Perhaps we can eventually learn enough from telling the story so that it can't happen ever again, in the Balkans or anywhere else in the world. There will never be enough novels either by Indians and Pakistanis or by diasporic Indians and Pakistanis to tell the tales of each of 17 million people who became refugees as the two countries celebrated their independence from the British. There will never be enough novels to tell the tales of those who died -- 5 million people.

What the Body Remembers is the first novel I know of where the story of partition is told from the point of view of Sikh characters. My characters are in no way representative of all Sikhs -- there are 18 million of us worldwide, Sikhs of different races and varying degrees of orthodoxy. When the British pulled out of India, the Sikh community in Punjab province where the novel takes place was caught in the land grab between two majority communities, the Hindus and Muslims. Four and a half million Sikhs used to live in the part of Punjab region that is now Pakistan. Today, there are only 1000. However, comparisons to the Jewish Holocaust are not appropriate, since we gave violence for violence. Comparisons to the American Civil War are not appropriate because we didn't have armies meeting one another on battlefields. What happened to the Sikhs in 1947 was more like what is happening to Muslims of Serbia today, long before the euphemism "ethnic cleansing" came along. To write a book with Sikh characters, you can't just go down to your corner library and check out books. Interlibrary loan brought me books from all over the world. It would have taken me about ten or twelve years to write this novel without the Internet. Not only are library catalogs and research sources on-line, there are listservs where I made friends and interviewed people. When I traveled to Pakistan to research the setting of *What the Body*

Remembers, cyberfriends smoothed the way. In reading secondary research, I found that the culture of origin of the historian influenced statistics and even dates. For instance, English historians place the number of people killed during Partition at 2million. Indian and Pakistani historians place it closer to 5 million. The heroes of each community are different: contrary to European historians Indians do not see Mountbatten as the white knight, and contrary to the Hindu point of view, Gandhi is not a great hero to the Sikhs whose land he gave away at Partition. To Pakistani historians, Jinnah is not the obdurate inflexible unleasher of violence, but a saint who made a terrible choice between the 40 million Muslims left in India and the 90 million he could make a homeland for in Pakistan. And so the first step to understanding Partition is to realize that Satya (Truth) is a fictional character.

But my story is set in the Sikh community -- and it's just one story, an imagined one. My first problem in looking at the material was that, being a minority community everywhere, theology is often prized above history amongst Sikh scholars. My second problem was that many Indian historians learned their trade from British history books. My challenge to myself was not to tell the story of the Sikhs from the standpoint of the men -- there a few non-fiction books that cover their story -- but from the perspective of the Sikh women. This quickly became very frustrating because books on Sikh history are usually written by men. They contain on average a single index entry under "women" or mention a maximum of two Sikh women by name. As a member of one of the few religions in the world that actually says women and men are equal, and demands that a Sikh woman be called "princess" to show how valuable she is, I found my research running up against the difference between theory and practice. My solution was to resort to oral histories and imagination.

What the Body Remembers is a very feminist book if you define feminism as the radical notion that a woman is a person -- it depends on how accustomed you are to women having rights as people, including the right to own their own bodies. It comments on woman to woman power relations, surrogate motherhood, and the two strains of feminism, strident and persuasive, that we have in operation today. Nevertheless, the men in this novel are also trapped in their gender, religions, times and cultures too -- as we all are in every time and culture; there is nothing new in the universe.

This novel has no glossary nor italics for Indian words, because I feel these break the spell of the story. Instead, Indian words are used and defined by context, in the same way as we learn language as children. Indian words were necessary, firstly because I was writing outside the system of Judeo-Christian symbols, and in some contexts English is insufficient: certain objects do not have names in English. But then, had I been overly concerned about complete authenticity, you wouldn't be reading this novel in English at all.

Sometimes I'm asked, "How would you like a reader to approach your writing?" I'd like readers to approach this book knowing it's not a book written solely for a white, middle-class audience. It is a book written for a hybrid, global audience - in short, for all of us who can read. Even without the background I've presented above, it's a darn good story. May you feel my characters feelings and times as deeply as I did in bringing it to you.

Shauna Singh Baldwin