Research Paper English Literature

# Studying the Trauma of Gender and the Politics of Partition: A Focus on What The Body Remembers

**Mansi Chauhan**

Research Scholar, Department of English, KSKV Kachchh University, Bhuj, Kachchh, Gujarat.

**ABSTRACT**

The proposed research paper seeks to study the Partition and gendered violence on various levels through different women characters portrayed in What the Body Remembers. Violated women who symbolized violated nation were stigmatized by the society and many of them preferred death than being labeled as 'impure' women. Many women committed suicide because they feared of falling into the hands of 'others' or killed by their 'own' people in the glorious name of 'sacrifice'. The manifestation of women in this novel raises issues that are enormously diverse and it emphasizes on narratives of women which are often omitted in the history.

**KEYWORDS** Nation, History, Partition, Gendered Violence, Kusum, Roop.

"The body did not simply develop its own idiom and its own memory in response to violence and trauma as an act of representation, the appropriation of the body of the victim for making memory though the infliction of pain was itself an important component." (Das, 1995, p. 186)

Giving birth to Pakistan was the most painful experience; the crucial historical landmark that completely transformed the nation. Independence did not bring a new dawn of hope but carried a night of despair with it. *What the Body Remembers* stands as a 'bearing witness' of the Partition of India of 1947; the Commonwealth Writer's Prize winning novel penned by Shauna Singh Baldwin, a Canadian-American of Indian descent and an applauded Indian diasporic novelist. The proposed research paper aims to link the trauma of gender with the politics of Partition by examining *What the Body Remembers.* Women were the prime sufferers of that tumultuous time and this novel sheds light on the hideous face of society at the time of splitting up when women became victims of both, Partition and patriarchy.

This research paper seeks to study the violence of women on various levels, on the religious, social and most prominently on the biological level through different women characters. Kusum is a meek and submissive, whereas Roop is an assertive whose inner ability comes out at the crucial time of division. Violated women were stigmatized by the society and many of them preferred death than being labeled as 'impure' or 'polluted'. This mindset of a society can be seen in the words of Roop, *"Revati Bhua was right-Papaji thinks that for good-good women, death should be preferable to dishonor."* (*WBR,* 2011, p. 587) Women became the emblem of an honor of the community she belongs and in the larger context, honor of the nation. Society or community plays vital role in building the notion of 'honor' and it is believed as an extremely sensitive issue as the androcentric ideology does not permit a woman to live without an honor. This shows that how the notion of 'chastity' and 'purity' are imbedded in a society in which death with honour is more desirable and preferable than living with dishonor. Abducted woman faced rejection and outcaste by a community which denies accepting her because she is 'touched by other' and becomes a sinner and punished for a crime not committed by her. Sangeeta Ray observes:

"The inevitability of rape leaves women with the 'choice' of committing suicide so that she can be accommodated within the narrative of the nation as legitimate and pure-albeit dead–citizen. Those who survive rape are refused entry into the domestic space of the new nation." (Ray, 2000, p. 135-136)

Women's honour is interlinked with the nation's honour and men are considered the protector. Women are not looked as an autonomous and they don't have an authority even on their own body. Many women committed suicide because they feared of falling into the hands of 'others' or they were killed by their 'own' in the glorious name of 'sacrifice' like Kusum who was killed by her father-in-low. Roop heard many people who were advocating this dogma. One man said; "I made martyrs of seventeen women and children in my family before their izzat could be taken." (*WBR,* 2011, p. 559) Embracing death was the only choice available for them as the rejection was the bigger trauma than mutilation and less painful than death. This designates that the violence doesn't always come from the 'other' but also from woman's 'own people' and her 'own community'. Woman's suffering does not end after her abduction but it is actually the beginning of her wretched life. Her next phase of life after violence becomes more miserable when she has to suffer a thousand storms ahead. Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin remarks in their book *"Borders and Boundries"*:

"… honour- for loosing and preserving –is located in the body of the woman… So powerful and general was the belief that safeguarding a woman's honour is *essential* to upholding male and community honour that a whole new order of violence came into play, by men against their own kinswomen." (Menon and Bhasin,1998, p. 44)

Taking woman's life by giving it beautiful tags like 'sacrifice', 'martyrdom' and 'bravery' shows an ugly face of a society where man have a right even on woman's death. Sometimes they are compared to Sita who sacrificed to save her honor and became a *'sati'*. Man is a decision-maker of both life and death of a woman. Patriarchal society make them powerless where are bereft of a right to choose and compelled to live a life what man chooses for her; not allowed to cross patriarchal threshold and obliged living according to the norms structured by men. To kill a woman or the act of committing suicide of a woman was considered normal and popular phenomenon of that period which put forwards unfairness of a society. Menon and Bhasin comments on this cruelty: "Such an extreme circumstance transforms the deliberate taking of life into an act of humanity, easily accommodated in an unfolding scenario of shame, honour and martyrdom *(shahidi).* The consensus here is that actual death is preferable to death-in-life or symbolic death of rape/abduction/ conversion; the consensus is that murder is permissible." (Menon and Bhasin, 1998, p. 59)

Later Kusum's body was dismembered, sliced into six parts and her womb was ripped out by the Muslims showing how her body became a medium by the Muslims to convey a mes-

sage to the men of her community. Roop looks mystified and bewildered hearing about abducted women and says; "Men etch their anger upon woman-skin, swallow their pride dissolved in women's blood." (*WBR,* 2011, p. 553) Male-controlled society considers women as their 'possession' or 'property' and at the brutal time of Partition; people of other community took their vengeance by keeping opponent community's 'possession' in their custody or by destroying it. In those dreadful days, abduction became a way of taking reprisal to other community. This is the violation, not only of women's body but also the violation of her both the spaces, private and national space. Dishonoring or dismembering the enemy women was considered a matter of pride and a mark of victory for a community. Ultimately, in this cruel game of revenge, there were women who suffered and became victims of this wild justice. Seeing the dead body of Kusum, Roop thinks,

"*But I must remember,* thinks Roop. *I must remember Kusum body.*

Roop will remember Kusum's body, re-membered."(*WBR,* 2011, p. 581)

Her fragmented body is the symbol of fragmented nation which cannot be reunited and has gone through this painful period of Partition that leaves it broken. Abducted body of a woman stands for the despoiled and pessimistic nation which is abandoned to its sad fate. Violation of women's body symbolically represents the violated nation which now become deserted and desolated after passing through the trauma. Roop articulates it in these words:

*"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. Who will rescue and pyre the bodies of my qoum? What use now to be Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or Christian, what use the quom, the biradari, the caste, the compartments that order our lives? What do they do for un now in time of chaos when person meets person and the question between us is only this: Can you feel as I feel?"* (*WBR,* 2011, p. 547)

Roop is not a passive or mute; her sufferings compels her raising a voice against the patriarchy. She saves her children and herself from abduction by her courage and presence of mind and also becomes the support of her family. Roop hides her religious identity by giving the Muslim sepoys an impression that she is a Muslim woman. This tragic episode of division converts her in an audacious woman and her real 'self' comes out after facing this struggle. Through realization and development of her 'self', she gets an agency. The psychological impact of the Partition can be perceived through the reaction of Roop when she was waiting for Sardarji's arrival at Delhi platform. Seeing women's mutilated bodies, she loses her sanity for a while. This sight becomes intolerable for her and she undresses herself screaming,

"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."(*WBR,* 2011, p. 560)

These words of Roop are a plea to regard a woman as a human being, not as an object, to possess, to ravish or to destroy. After passing through the disaster of division, Roop becomes strong-willed and vigorous. The manifestation of women characters in this novel raises issues that are enormously diverse. It is the story of women's exploitation and her empowerment, her silence and her resistance, her womanhood and her victimhood. Shauna Singh Baldwin uncovers the torment of women who were the silent sufferers by giving the low down to the unspoken voices of women and this novel stands as a spectator of this mayhem. Women can forgive but they are unable to forget the trauma of violence that is unspeakable and unforgettable. It is the body which remembers because violence is inscribed on body, of woman and of nation.

"What is remembered in the body is well remembered." (Scarry,1985, p. 109)

## REFERENCES

Shauna Singh, B. (2011). What the Body Remembers. New Delhi: Rupa Publications. Abbreviated WBR. Veena, D. (1995). Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India. New Delhi: Oxford UP. Ritu, M. and Kamala, B. (1998). Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition. New New Delhi: Kali for Women. Sangeeta, R. (2000). En-Gendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives. Durham: Duke University Press. Elaine, S. (1985). The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World. New York: Oxford University Press.