



BOOK REVIEW

What the Body Remembers

Social Neglect and Public Action

By Shauna Singh Baldwin

Harper Collins India, 1999, £ 12.99, pp 475

Review: ○ Anurima Banerji

IN her debut novel, Shauna Singh Baldwin mesmerises with her chronicle of fictional female biographies prophesying the trauma of partition in India. Her specifically feminist dialogue with history imaginatively constructs the lives of two Sikh women, against the background of intense social upheaval which defined the subcontinent in the first half of the 20th century. Earlier, several observers have remarked that partition is a subject that makes its female survivors particularly evasive, or renders them mute—either out of necessity or personal choice. Baldwin's novel is an attempt to interrupt this pattern of silence and make women speak as principal interlocutors in history. She consciously sets out to articulate the feminine reality of the time, and successfully explores the “other side of silence” as she concentrates on Sikh women's experiences of domestic and political turmoil.

The narrative hinges on the interwoven chronologies of Roop and Satya, and their common husband, Sardarji. (Deliberately, Sardarji is not introduced until much later in the book, since the story focuses on the novel's two “sheroes,” as Baldwin calls them).

Roop grows up, motherless, with two siblings, Jeevan, who “will have good kismet; he is a boy,” and Madani, she of the rabbit teeth and demure ways. Under the watchful eye of their over-protective father, Bachan Singh, they stay in the village with the evocative name of Pari Darvaza, “Doorway of the Fairies.” An adventurous and determined child, born under the influence of the powerful Mangal star, Roop is nevertheless tamed and educated in feminine grace mostly by the array of female relatives populating the household: Nani, her maternal grandmother, Aunt Revathi, her father's sister, and Gujri, the domestic caretaker and surrogate mother in one. Roop is further instructed by her aunt, Lajo Bua, who imparts to her the rules of acceptable feminine behaviour—agreeing with her elders, speaking

softly, and never feeling angry—lessons internalized well into adulthood.

Later, to pay off debts incurred at her older sister's marriage, Roop is married off as a second wife to Sardarji, who has taken her into his home for the sole purpose of producing male heirs—his first spouse, Satya, having failed to deliver. The two wives' conflicts over securing power in the household make up the remainder of the plot. Each tries to become indispensable to Sardarji—Roop seduces him with her beauty, and Satya, with her sharp mind; each fulfils separate but equal functions, as their husband demands.

Using the device of interpreting collective history through the mirror of family relations, Baldwin frames marriage as an allegory of national consciousness in pre-independence India, threading together private memory with collective myth, the fate of a nation and the small world of its inhabitants—a familiar strategy employed in other novels about partition, like Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* and Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, where the personal serves as a parable illustrating the depths of national

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crisis. In *What the Body Remembers*, the struggles between the man and his two wives, cast in opposition to each other—Truth and the Body—serve as a metaphor for the splitting of India by the British: Sardarji, the patriarchal conqueror who divides and rules Roop and Satya, is a manifestation of the imperial conqueror, who divides and rules the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh *quams* (nationalities), eventually creating India and Pakistan.

The central actors embody a functional symbolism that helps to credibly sustain meaning; however, this suppresses character development, since their metaphorical value becomes primary. While the use of such symbolism encourages a clearer interpretation of events, there are limits to this design when human characters are not allowed to transgress the boundaries of the symbol. Their actions turn predictable, their idiosyncracies stabilize, and their purpose becomes obvious. The reader knows, for instance, that Roop is translated into the story as the feminine body: the exact incarnation of beauty and youth (indeed, she is idealized for her skin—“smooth as a new apricot beckoning from the limb of a tall tree,” and “her wide, heavily lashed brown eyes”), a physical ornament and sexual prize, a vessel for bearing children; we know she will not exit this fixed frame of representation throughout the novel. Similarly, colonial authority is personified in Sardarji by Cunningham, “his English-gentleman-inside,” a permanent ‘voice of reason’ occupying the former’s stream of consciousness—so much so that:

Sardarji cannot remember how he thought before he learned to think with Cunningham... Cunningham can edit paragraphs in Sardarji’s mind before releasing them for

utterance, and now that he has trained Sardarji on what is Done and Simply Not Done, generally stays within the bounds of reasonable discourse.

This chain of meaning lends a certain clarity to the protagonists’ roles, but if freed from their status as emblems of a larger political ideology, they would perhaps find space for a deeper and more substantive expression of character. As it is, they are not really allowed to travel deep beneath the surface—limited in their scope to act or change in the course of the story—when personal dilemmas are neatly superimposed onto political predicaments.

Although the story privileges Roop’s telling—what Roop remembers, is, literally, what “the body” remembers—Satya is the only voice who speaks in the first person, and also the one who opens and closes the novel. She is thus allowed to claim a power of subjectivity not available to any of the other protagonists. Satya alone transcends the symbolic realm effectively, as her character is imbued with contradictions: the wish to please her husband does not override her own self-interest; she is vociferous about her political convictions, even while risking disagreement with Sardarji; and she transforms her anger into gestures of resistance, rather than suffering silently. In one critical moment, she reflects on suicide as the hallmark of ultimate self-possession:

She can release herself, yes. She does not have to be trapped in matter. There is a place she can go by choice, her own choice. By her will, her own free will. Somewhere there may be life without fear, where she can begin again... Surrender to death, tempter of all martyrs.

Wake to that dignity that comes from refusal, refusal to live without *izzat*!

Izzat. The essentially untranslatable quality of respect, dignity, and honour—which is also a special burden and marker of femininity—is a significant concept in the book, a concept that invites admiration, when ethics are upheld in its name, and elicits horror, when it requires killing, as in one unbearably brutal scene where Roop’s sister-in-law is hacked to pieces by her own father-in-law, ostensibly to save her honour from the marauders out to terrorize women, in the shattering aftermath of partition.

However, for a storyline predicated on partition, the novel does not convey a firm grasp of the nightmarish events and surreal tragedies unfolding at the time. Clearly, Baldwin has undertaken a great deal of research, but still the novel is unable to outline the cause of violence, beyond the most obvious reason of religious antagonism. Nor does the narrative communicate the depth of insanity unleashed by the event, beyond a few sensational episodes of murder. Instead, the book remains suspended somewhere between partition epic and historical romance, as the main players seem unusually isolated, entangled in private domestic melodramas, while the political exigencies of the day, the undercurrents of rage leading up to the massacres and political explosions, are relegated to the periphery until the very end. Unlike its literary predecessors—the eerie, haunting tone subtending Sidhwa’s *Ice Candy Man* comes to mind—*What the Body Remembers* fails to grip the reader with a stark and hardhitting portrait of the tumult reigning in those bloody, riot-torn days.

Nevertheless, Baldwin displays considerable command over her craft. Effortlessly, she takes the reader through an imaginative narrative laced with beautiful prose. Abandoning the classical structure of narration, and starting the story from the middle with Satya's jealous appraisal of Roop, is an effective choice that gives an aura of mystery to Roop's life before marriage and establishes Satya as a power to reckon with. There are exquisite descriptions of people and places, and all the five senses are magically conjured in several lovely passages, such as this one describing the intimate corridors of Rawalpindi:

Here is a man who spends his days repeating the ninety-nine names of Allah, there a man who spends his days repeating the thousand names of Vishnu... Here a bangle seller wraps a dozen glass bangles and a subtle inquiry of matrimonial interest in the crumbling softness of a Punjabi newspaper... From the sweetmaker's shop comes the aroma of potato pakoras sizzling in a massive iron bowl of hot oil... A goldsmith holds his delicate copper scale before the mesh-masked glittering eyes of *burqa*-clad women... Here is a cobbler so humble he knows himself unworthy to look at the sky; there a turban dyer so brash he paints the sky new colours...

Beyond the novel's delightfully rich aesthetics lies an interesting quandary. The problem posed by many self-declared feminist novels is, paradoxically, how they become implicated and invested in perpetuating the status of women as oppressed. The mythology of the Indian woman as the repository for male abuse and exploitation find its full expression in this novel. Girls

are *always* unwanted, neglected and cast aside in favour of sons; even as she dies, the mother-in-law "pays" her son-in-law "for having lived in married daughter's home"; daughters are perceived as "guests" in their natal households until they join their marital families, their "real families"; education for girls is undermined, because "why remember things she will never need to do what a woman is for?"; women are taught to please men with simpering subservience and obedience. Basically, all females seem to exist in an irredeemably miserable condition, with too much bitterness and too little joy. These bodies lack souls.

Yet, such myths about Indian females are now taken to be so self-evident that they are now enshrined as truth, rather than being received as ideas in need of sustained interrogation.

This is not to suggest that real discrimination does not exist; but the assumption that situations described in the book uniformly describe the experience of all Indian women, is dangerously misleading.

In fact, the author's choice to reveal these women's tragic lives conceals another female history of struggle. At one point, Satya utters these lines: "Surely there will come another time when just being can bring *izzat* in return, when a woman will be allowed to choose 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." But Satya's vision is not some utopia belonging to the future; there was a whole repertoire of *shakti* stories which existed as a parallel reality in her time, too. There were women involved in the independence movement, women who fought for access to education, women who

never succumbed to male dictates—in short, they lived the alternatives. How long will literature continue to present us with heroines who only dream about a different world, who kill themselves when cornered by chaos?

Somehow, it has become routine for authors dealing with Indian themes to use the stock images of oppressed women, perhaps because they are easily marketable and hold an undeniably anthropological appeal. So, what often begins as a legitimate critique of sexism, rendered in a creative form, quickly disintegrates into a habitual parroting of ethnographic clichés about the lamentable status of poor Indian women.

What the Body Remembers is marred by a lack of originality, as prevalent sexist stereotypes are rehashed and reiterated, instead of being decentered. The novel repeats the well-rehearsed equation between Indian cultural patriarchy and female subordination. Like many feminist novels, it inadvertently closes the possibilities and reinscribes Indian women's subjugation, instead of creating new ways of being. One wishes for some transcendence of that theme, for someone to subvert this always-already-written script of gender in India. Does an author prove her feminist credentials simply by showcasing oppression? Isn't it the role of art, and the special license of fiction, to engender avenues for escape, instead of presenting the stereotypes as if they were inevitable and irrefutable? Besides, merely exposing the deeply entrenched problems of sexism in India—which are by now widely known and also widely contested—other interventions and representations are crucial, if we want to arrive at a truly feminist literature. □