

# EXILED FROM THE SELF: DIASPORA PARTITION AND FEMALE IDENTITY IN "WHAT THE BODY REMEMBERS"

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## ABSTRACT

*The 1947 Partition of India was more than just a physical split; it was a profound wound that shattered identities, especially those of women, who were made to represent the victims of patriarchal, religious, and communal violence. "What the Body Remembers", by Shauna Singh Baldwin, deftly illustrates how women are suppressed due to strict religious and cultural norms and emphasize the challenge of female identity in the face of social unrest. In this paper, the disintegration of female identity is metaphorically represented by Partition, as women's bodies are used as battlefields for religious nationalism, male honour, and family heritage. Through Roop and Satya, the book emphasizes how women's roles are dictated, their agency is silenced, and they are driven into fractured identities by patriarchal domination, which is supported by cultural and religious ideologies. The study also situates women as both victims and survivors in the greater context of Partition by examining the links between the loss of home and nation and the elimination of female agency. The study makes the case that women's losses during Partition go beyond the individual and represent the loss of gendered identity overall by examining Baldwin's depiction of gendered pain. The study's goal is to illuminate the relationship between gender, religion, and national trauma by showing how historical and cultural factors outside of women's control form, repress, and shatter their identities.*

**Keywords:** Gendered Trauma, Fractured Female Identity, Diaspora and Displacement, Symbolism of partition

## Introduction

The cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism are closely intertwined with postcolonialism as an academic debate. "Postcolonialism" is a phrase that brings forth an examination of the artistic practices employed by the imperial powers to subjugate the colonial people's bodies and minds, as well as the freedom and political emancipation of the colonized from the colonizers. Over time, their voice has been silenced as inferior by the colonial mindset. The word is associated with imperialism and the exploitation of the weak to establish their dominating cultural hegemony and render the colonial people helpless and mute.

"Like the flash of a supernova, the star of colonialism in India died in an explosion of internecine violence and bloodletting. Partition was the largest mass migration in history, the messiest national divorce- and one of the quickest taking places in just a few months" (Akash, 2000).

The Partition was a watershed point in the history of the Indian subcontinent. It is easy to see how the scholarly literature has changed over time, even though the trauma and living experiences of the Partition were long hidden under a dictatorship of silence. It now pays greater attention to those factors that it had previously overlooked or rejected and has grown more complex. For example, there is a heightened understanding of how the violence of the Partition disadvantaged women.

Along with being exploited politically, economically, and culturally, the politics of colonialism also led to the mental torture of the native people. Accordingly, Edward Said claims in *Orientalism* (27) that the East is only a realm of ignorance from the viewpoint of the Western colonial masters. It is evident from this mindset that the supremacy of the West stifles the East's potential. The non-West is perceived as "the other" of the West, he contends, and the concept of the Orient has been a potent construct. This idea serves as motivation for colonialists in the colonial world, while postcolonialism aims to investigate the importance of the mechanisms that give rise to "the other." As stated by the pioneer of postcolonial

theory, **Frantz Fanon**, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), "Colonialism is a source of destruction and trauma for colonized peoples who are taught to look fragmentedly upon their people, their culture, and themselves" (227). In postcolonial literature, identity politics presents a significant problem as the anti-conquest narrative examines the excluded people's social and cultural viewpoints. These marginalized people's social and cultural perspectives address the colonizers' creative resistance to their culture, the challenges of establishing a colonial society due to cultural resistance, how the colonizers came to define themselves post-colonially, and how neo-colonialism uses social relations to see the ethnic world as inhabited by others.

Women's testimonies of the sectarian violence that precipitated Partition were largely silent, according to Jill Didur, which she believes was "a sign of their inability to find a language to articulate their experiences without invoking metaphors of purity and pollution." She also contends that "these silences and ambiguities in women's stories should not be resolved, accounted for, translated or recovered but understood as a critique of the project of patriarchal modernity" (**Jill, 2006**).

Another important element in postcolonial literature is the problem of identity, which describes how colonized people identify themselves and how postcolonial writers attempt to express that identity. An identity quest is frequently depicted in writings about colonialism and the hardships of the postcolonial world.

When postcolonial discourse is examined, it becomes clear that it and feminist theory are quite similar. Both fields complement one another and are associative. In the first place, both discourses fight against injustice and oppression and are primarily political. Furthermore, both oppose the primacy of masculine power and authority and reject the traditional patriarchal, hierarchical structure that is ruled by white male hegemony. Both patriarchy and imperialism are phallogocentric, supremacist ideologies that oppress and control their people. The oppressed woman and the colonial subject are comparable in this regard (**Ashcroft et al., Post-Colonial Studies 101**).

## Research Gap

Despite the ocean of studies on Shauna Singh Baldwin's "What the Body Remembers" that have existed, there is a notable research gap in the context of psychological diaspora. In the previously analyzed works by researchers, there have been plenty of discussions of colonialism, partition, violence, abduction, rape, molestation, patriarchy, etc but there lies the hidden gap of the psychological verdicts in context to the horrifying pivotal moment in the history of India. This paper will cover the gap through a comprehensive analysis of the trauma of the characters, notably the female characters and their sufferings, through the lens of trauma theory that has been understudied.

## Methodology

This study examines Shauna Singh Baldwin's "What the Body Remembers" using a qualitative, literary analysis technique that integrates trauma theory to fill in the identified research gaps. Key passages that highlight the themes of trauma, broken female identity, displacement, emotional diaspora, and division symbolism are the subject of a careful reading of the book. The novel's depiction of trauma is examined through the application of trauma theory themes, including communal trauma, cultural trauma, and the unspeakability of horrific occurrences. thorough analysis of the girls' relevance in illustrating the atrocities of the Partition as a symbol of masculine dignity, death, and relocation.

## Objectives

- To depict the role of religious and cultural expectations in shaping female identity.

- To analyze how they used the female body as a site of memory, trauma, and resistance.
- To investigate how partition of India symbolizes the fractured female identities of female characters.
- In what ways displacement led to a fragmented sense of self.

## Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial studies have lately responded to this perspective by diving into the gender issue and investigating how it affects the lives of female colonial subjects. Women's predicament of being silenced between the double oppression of patriarchy and imperialism is revealed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critical examination of "Sati Pratha," the self-immolation of women at the funerals of deceased husbands in India, in her well-known essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988). In Spivak's article, she writes:

“If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak, 82-83)

Given that women were frequently the targets of double colonization, being persecuted for both their status as women and as colonized people, it is important to acknowledge that men and women were impacted by colonial oppression in various ways. Shauna Singh's goal as a feminist writer is to examine women's inner selves, internal and external tensions, and quests for identity, including national, cultural, religious, and female identities. The tension between individual awareness and national consciousness and the conflict between self and society are topics covered in her book *What the Body Remembers*.

“The idea of body memory and collective memory naturally follows beliefs in mind-body connection, and oneness”

The significance of the body as a source of images is typically emphasized in feminist critiques written from a biological point of view. How women see their role in society necessitates an understanding of body conceptions; but body concepts cannot be communicated without the use of linguistic, social, and literary contexts.

“The difference of woman's literary practice, therefore must be sought (in Miller's words) in the 'body of her writing and not the writing of her body'” (Nancy, 1980).

It should be noted that Baldwin's depiction of immigrant women's issues is more accurate because it is based on her own experiences. In feminist critique, women's identities are a major topic of discussion. The intricacy of the integrated multiplicity inside the solitary self sustains the identity of Diasporic women. In the remote native land that predominates in their recollections, they attempt to investigate the roots. On the one hand, women must reject the rules and conventions of the male-dominated society to establish their own identity, but on the other hand, they attempt to preserve their cultural identity by adhering to the patterns.

The main character in the chosen book, *Roop*, goes through emotional turmoil after marrying Sardar ji and having to leave her family and home. Upon arriving at her husband's house, ripped from the figurative womb, she is promised, "Time will heal you." *Roop* understands the true meaning of these words' years later:

“When women like Toshi says time will heal, they mean that time will heal not so the wound bleeds any less, but so the bleeding becomes my habitual companion, and only if it stops one day will I notice its absence.” (Baldwin, 213)

She feels as though she does not fit in this new setting and that she has completely given up her distinct identity. When religion is presented, the concept of bodily memory is employed. In many ways, Punjab's many religious sects are at odds with one another. The social standing of Indian women during the novel's historical period is portrayed by Baldwin.

By tracing Satya and Roop's experiences, Baldwin paints a picture of a way of life that has been practiced for ages.

Roop ponders what her father did:

"Papa ji thinks that for good-good women, death should be preferable to dishonour" (**Baldwin, 456**).

A woman's value in this society is inextricably linked to her honour as a pure woman, a "good-good, sweet-sweet," and to her value as a wife and mother, as this story most powerfully demonstrates. Her life is not worth living after that value has been taken away. This means that every female character in the book is trying to figure out who she really is, but Baldwin uses these characters as a vehicle for her own identity journey. Women have more significant issues during migration than do migrant men, and they are consistently viewed as weaker, subservient, and inferior. Due to their closer adherence to the cultural, moral, and religious norms of their home country, many immigrant women find it more challenging to adapt to their new environment. The finest and most genuine approach to examining the issues facing women in migration is through diasporic literature. In a sense, Indian writing in English is a byproduct of the cultural conflict with the West, which is shown in Indian English novels from the first. With a similar topic of cultural conflict, current Diasporic Indian English writers evoke colonial legacies in modern culture while captivating and drawing readers from all over the world. Several Indian Diaspora women writers depict the issues faced by immigrant women in cross-cultural interactions. The issues faced by migrants and their ties to both their home country and their new one are depicted by the women authors of the Indian Diaspora.

The narrative focuses around the concept of Partition, which is analogous to a volcano that accumulates pressure until it erupts and swallows all humanitarian principles. Abdul Aziz, Sardarji's manager, told him stories of slashed bodies and crushed skulls of Sikh and Hindu shopkeepers, Muslims ripping off the turbans of both young and old and forcing them to eat beef, dragging infants from their mothers' arms, rapes, temples desecrated with cow's blood, and women jumping into wells to preserve their honour.

Sardarji thought that the Sikhs would resemble the goats that Muslims sacrifice at Sadqa after witnessing the devastation that lay ahead. Following a thorough examination of the circumstances, he concluded that he needed to give up his most valuable quality, ambivalence, and that his capacity to blend cultures and colors needed to be limited.

He decided to depart for New Delhi to be with his family and hand over his Lahore office to Rai Alam Khan, who had just been named chief accountant for the Pakistan Service of Engineers, saying:

"Lahore is no place to be. A Muslim can pass for a Hindu, a Hindu for a Muslim. But we Sikhs with our turbans----we are such easy targets" (**p. 398**).

To get to the Indian border, Roop and Sardarji both travel in ways that endanger their lives. Initially, he dispatched Roop and his kids in a Packard in the hopes that no one would dare to stop a car while he chose to travel by train with his attendant Atma Singh. They travel through petrol bombs and Sten gun fire thrown in Hindu and Sikh homes and shops, shrinking from every light, passing through roads that smell of urine and death, paths that are full of smoke from burning houses, and eventually arriving at the

railway station, which was crowded with thousands of men like him wearing turbans, women wearing chunnis, and their kids milling and clamouring in front of the train, desperate to escape.

In the meantime, Muslims stopped the vehicle that Roop was driving with her kids, a maid-servant, and the driver. She covers before the thought of:

“Dying young without ever reaching Delhi, about to be raped, mutilated like the woman whose breasts were cut off, or made to recite the Kalima” (p. 421).

She controlled the scene by attempting to project Satya's arrogance and authority. When a large group of guys attacked her maid Jorimon, they grunted in the dark like animals. Roop beat as hard as she could at the men with her locked fists. She struck and thrashed the gasping males,

“With anger, pure heat of anger like molten steel within her” (p. 421)

During those brief moments of fear, Roop discovered that there are several things that death is not nearly as bad as what males can do to women. In the end, she managed to get away.

Another tragic victimization story concerns Roop's sister-in-law Kusum, who was discovered with each leg amputated at the joint. Her corpse was cut into six pieces and then rearranged to give the impression that she was entire. The body, however, strangely showed no evidence of self-defence or rape. Jeevan, the husband, was bewildered,

“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.”

Jeevan wondered what the message might be. Kusum's womb, which had given birth to his three offspring, had been pulled out. The deliberate voice that was delivered to him was:

“We will stamp your kind, your very species from existence...this is a war against your quom...we take the womb so that there can be no Sikhs from it” (p. 447).

It was later discovered that Jeevan's father, Kusum's father-in-law, took her life rather than giving her up to the Muslims. He could not bear the thought of any Muslim touching her. Here the aspect of a female's fractured identity denoted by the owns have led the readers to think of the psychological trauma that not only Kusum faced but her in-laws went through the same. The psychology that crossed Kusum's in-laws was rather more fragmented and diseased that it led him to take his own daughter-in-law's life.

Baldwin discusses soul rebirth as a method to remember the past. Lee (20) suggests that the voyage of the soul is a non-verbal and non-textual approach to recalling the past, in addition to standard methods like writing memoirs and oral testimony. The writer references the concept of atma, the soul that passes on to the next body after death. This trip is governed by one's karma, or previous actions (Lee 20). Satya, a character in the story, represents the spiritual concept of bodily memory conveyed through reincarnation (Jamal and Singh 54). The novel starts and finishes from the character's first-person point of view. In the foreword of *Undivided India*, 1895, she describes her birth and regrets being reborn as a woman:

“If the circle that is your body falls on a ladder inscribed on the game board of time, you climb. If it lands on a snake, you slip-slide back. Resume your journey again. And if you do not learn what you were meant to learn from your past lives, you are condemned to repeat them. This is karma. [...] I have slid down the snake's tail, and for all the money and temple offerings I lavished on pandits the last time round, here I am again... born a woman. [...] If I find any of those pandits, I will tear their hearts out” (Baldwin 1).

Gender prejudice remains prevalent in India, as seen by this sharp portrayal. Satya, a baby in a patriarchal world, rejects her feminine identity through Buddhist rebirth images.

While women's treatment in India has improved dramatically over the past century, there is still more to be done. To eliminate discrimination, action must be taken. The Republic of India, despite its independence, has a history of violence. Satya, born in 1895, experienced British rule and the independence struggle that led to Partition. Her status remained unchanged, despite her rebirth as a baby in 1965. The Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, the State of Emergency, Indira Gandhi's assassination, the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, or the present Kashmir conflict have not occurred in New Satya. In other words, Shauna Singh Baldwin argues that India has yet to transform. Despite escaping colonial rule, the country continues to face cultural and religious conflicts because of the Partition.

## Conclusion

The work raises awareness of women's experiences throughout the Holocaust. The novelist's use of omen figures highlights the sorrow, anguish, pain, and ambivalence associated with Partition. As a female writer, she has delved into the intimate details of women's lives, exploring their inner psychology and pain, which can lead to either silence or outright rebellion. The author uses organized narratives, reincarnation, and metaphors to criticize both the historical event and modern India. Baldwin depicts the anguish experienced by individuals after Partition and the ongoing cycle of violence in India. This is a woman's viewpoint. Women suffered the most throughout this historic event, leading to a more intimate description of it in literature. Partition literature is compelling because to its intimate representation of female persecution and anguish, making it rich and complex.

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