

A Saga of Women's Oppression: A View from Baldwin's *'What The Body Remembers'*

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Abstract

The present article examines the women's oppression in the patriarchal world with the special focus on conflict situation. In addition, the article also explores the reasons of subordination of women and the experience of violence of various kinds including abduction, rape, killing many times in the name of "honor". Shauna Singh Baldwin in her work '*What the body remembers*' highlights the violence experienced by women often in the name of "honor" during and aftermath of the partition of Indian subcontinent in 1947. The Partition of India devastated lives on both sides of the border. In such scenario women's bodies became hapless victims of the division of the Indian subcontinent where men of both sides engaged in the duals of power. Countless families were separated, displaced, relations were ruined, and mistrust and hatred prevailed everywhere.

Keywords: women, partition, subordination, displacement, violence, patriarchy.

Introduction

The present paper seeks to analyze in detail the novel, *What the body remembers* keeping in mind the gendered perspective in pre and post partition of India. The objective of the present article is to make readers aware of the status and condition of women in a patriarchal society during normal as well as in conflict times. Many famous literary works on partition had been written like *Azadi*, *Pinjar*, *Tamas*, *Train to Pakistan*, "*Twice born, Twice death*", *Partitions*, *A river with three banks*, *Ashes and Petals*, *The other side of the silence* and many more. Through Baldwin's work reader gets to know about the agonies of people of Punjab during and aftermath of partition of India. In *What the body remembers*, writer throws the light on the ordeal and agonies of women during partition of India. Baldwin comprehensively portrays the physical and psychological violence and trauma suffered by women in a male dominated society through the detailed narratives of the roles of different women characters in the novel. Women are the most affected ones at the time of conflict, due to their subordinate position in the patriarchal society. They are often linked to the concept of 'honor' and due to their capacity of childbearing, they become easy targets in conflict times. They are not only

targeted by men of rival communities but also by their own male family members in the name of “honor”.

Status of Women through the narrative of *What the body remembers*

In *What the Body Remembers*, Shauna Singh focuses her attention on the issues of inequality between men and women that even prevailed before the partition. As the novel progresses, the reader becomes aware of the condition of women in the patriarchal society. The novel is set in the pre-partition time, the principal characters of the novel are: Roop, Satya, Sardarji, Bachan Singh, Gujri, Rewti, Jevan, Kusum, Huma. Roop and Satya, are the key women characters around whom the whole novel revolves. The author through her protagonists tries to show the suffering of common masses and the horrendous experiences witnessed by them during the partition. The novel also focuses on the issues like gender discrimination and women’s quest to search for her identity in the male dominated society, where in most of the times, her role is reduced to bear children, look after household chores and follow the commands of her husband and in-laws. These are the few norms established by the patriarchal society, which keep women at subordinate position. And propagation of these norms is done by various institutions like society, family and religion. The same preoccupation is reflected by Simone de Beauvoir in the *Second Sex*, where she describes how gender is a social construct and how society has fixed roles for women. According to her “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (273). She further elaborates that women are always kept at subordinated position and society and marriage plays a major role in maintaining and keeping her at this position. She claims:

Through marriage woman is no longer lent from one clan to another: she is torn up by the roots from the group into which she was born, and annexed by her husband’s group; he buys her as one buys a farm animal or a slave; he imposes his domestic divinities on her; and the children born to her belongs to the husband’s family. (106)

Clara Nubile, also highlights the plight of women and their subordinated position in the society in the following lines:

Being a woman in modern India means to be entrapped into the inescapable cage of —being a woman-wife-mother... A woman cannot exist outside the boundaries of married life and motherhood, otherwise she is perceived as useless and unworthy according to traditional Indian views... Indian women do not appear to have their independent role in society. Moreover, they must become a male appendix in order to have a role. (22)

As we begin to read the 500 pages novel, the author throws light on different incident, where one sees how women are kept at subordinate position by imposing laws of the patriarchy. And this training begins right from the childhood and it is the family and religion that works as an agent of patriarchal forces. As seen in the novel *Roop*, the daughter of Bacchan Singh, went to continue her studies at her aunt's place. Her aunt gives her instructions and advises that a woman must follow to become a good wife. To quote from the novel:

“Rule no one: You want to make a good marriage; you must be more graceful, more pleasing to your elders. I want to hear only ‘achchaji, “hanji” and ‘yes- ji’. Never Nahinji, or no-ji” ... Rule no two: “Speak softly, always softly”. ...Rule no three: ‘Never feel angry, never, never. No matter what happens or what your husband says, never feel angry, you might be hurt but never ever feel angry,’ she whispers to Madani and Roop. (Baldwin 97-98)

From the above quote, one observes how woman are being molded and shaped by her upbringing to serve in the patriarchal society. And this is how woman are made to believe from the very childhood that they are inferior to men and men holds superior position in the society. We also see how gender discrimination prevails in the traditional Indian families. The reader also becomes aware of this discrimination from one of the episodes of the novel. Roop eats her lunch sitting beside her brother Jeevan, the biased treatment of Gujri towards Jeevan and Roop is evident in the following conversation between Roop and Gujri, an old cook at Roop's home.

Roop twists away from Jeevan. She tears a wedge from a wheat roti and reaches into the tiffin bowl, but her hand meets a slap from Gujri- ‘Ay, Roop –bi! No eggs for you - the egg- burji is for Jeevan.’ Roop moves her wedge of roti to the next tiffin bowl, but Gujri pushes her hand away there too. ‘That’s chicken, for Jeevan,’ she says. ‘Take some daal’ Jeevan offers his plate, ‘Achcha, just a small bite, here’s some chicken.’ “Eggs and meat for a girl? No, don’t waste them” says Gujri.” (Baldwin 34-35)

Here one observes that Roop being a girl, is deprived of even a good food and Jeevan being a boy enjoys all the privileges. Here writer depicts the unequal treatment which is being generally given to the women in most of the societies. The prejudice towards women not only exists at the level of equality, education or rights to work but even at the level of basic needs. Author artistically weaves the sufferings of women in different situations. She very well depicts the pain and the suppression that woman faces on being a woman. In the novel, Roop asks Gujri “How old are you” Gujri replies- “Huh! I am as old as I am, I live till I die, and then again it starts. What to tell you she says.” (Baldwin 36)

Through Gujri's character readers can see how women die everyday as they are deprived of the basic rights. They have little or no say in the family where the words of men are the law for them. One can feel the profound pain of Gujri as she explains Roop that, she had died many times emotionally and physically and again started living. As author narrates that Gujri was a gift to the bride's family like mama's dowry pots and pans as she came with Roop's mother in

the dowry. She widowed at seven, her village people considered her unlucky after her husband died, even though she had never seen him. Gujri, then a seven-year girl destined to live a life of widow.

Subordination of women

Roop one of the important characters in the novel, a lively person with her limited dreams and hopes for a better future. Before she starts living her dreams, she is imposed with the norms of the society that she must adhere to. Bachan Singh, her father and her aunts constantly try to control her behavior by foisting rules and regulations. And in order to become a “good daughter”, “good wife” and “good mother” she must act in accordance with them.

In the novel, reader observes the oppression of Roop’s freedom and rights by her father as a sign of male dominance and authority. He doesn’t let her even read newspaper; the only thing that her daughter is supposed to read is Punjabi novels about Sikhs, which glorify men’s courage and their position in the society. Moreover, her father always gives her examples of her sister in law, Kusum. Kusum is always praised by Bachan Singh, as she knows cooking, she is a mother of two kids and she carries out all the domestic responsibilities without any complain, considering all this as her destiny. This is something very common in the patriarchal society, where women since their childhood are made to believe that the whole purpose of their existence is to: procreate, look after family and nurture children. And if she doesn’t comply with these set of duties she is devalued in the society. As noticed in the novel:

Papaji said, a few days ago, that Kusum is Lakshmi incarnate and Roop should follow everything she does, learn from her example... ‘Understand, Roop. A daughter leaves her father’s home, goes to another family’s home, but a daughter- in-law like Kusum has come to her real home, na? Can’t you learn to make tea as sweet and Pindi cholas as fiery as Kusum’s?’. (Baldwin126)

The above dialogue clearly depicts the condition and reason of subordination of women in the society. Roop’s father sees Kusum as the epitome of perfection because of her ability to make perfect tea and chickpeas. And Roop is mortified because she is not a good cook. The character of Bachan Singh in the novel represents the patriarchal mindset and men’s treatment towards women. In the novel one sees how men always try to dominate women and keep them at subordinate position by imposing burden of patriarchal structures on them. Further in the novel, we see the commodification of women. In the novel Sardarji, a rich landlord remarries Roop, despite the fact that he is already married to Satya. Sardarji, although a well-educated man unable to release himself from the clutches of the patriarchal mindset. The whole purpose of his remarriage is to get male heir from second wife, as his first wife Satya is childless. Sathupati Prasanna Sree also expresses the suffering and maltreatment of women in our societies. She asserts that: “A barren woman is a cursed one. A barren wife is pitilessly ill-

treated in the tradition bound Indian society and this is a universal phenomenon. Mother of male child is welcome and the mother of female child is not" (57).

As seen in the novel, Roop is valued in the family of Sardarji only because she is able to give him son. On the contrary Satya is ignored and later isolated because she is barren. The author of the novel through the characters of Roop and Satya is unveiling the dark side of our societies, where women are made to believe that they have no self-identity and they are incomplete without their husbands and children. The author of the novel through these female characters tries to give voice to those women, whose voice and painful stories are left unheard and buried in the history. In the novel, the character of Sardarji also represents the symbol of male authority. He is free to choose another wife without any struggle despite the fact; he is already married and much elder than Roop. Also, the unfair treatment given to Satya, just because she is unable to give him any heir, manifests the level of humiliation that women go through. The discrimination and stigma that a childless woman face is difficult to express in words. Ashish Nandy also highlights the importance of child in the lives of Indian woman. He asserts:

For the Indian mother, on the other hand, the son is the major medium of self-expression. It is her motherhood that the traditional family values and respects; her wifeness and daughterhood are devalued and debased. The woman's self-respect in the traditional system is protected not through her father or her husband, but through her son. (36-37)

This unequal treatment given to women and seeing them only a bearer of child, ultimately leads to their oppression and subordination. Through Satya's and Roop's characters, the reader is able to comprehend in depth the melancholy of women, who is treated as a mere object or a property of men, she is associated with. In the novel, we see the struggle of both the women to appease Sardarji, in order not to lose their position in his life. We can observe how Satya was dying every day with the anxiety of losing her husband to Roop, second wife of Sardarji. Satya feared of losing her position in her husband's life, since she couldn't give heir to Sardarji which Roop gave. Satya started feeling isolated and ignored as her husband paid more attention to Roop and also gifted Satya's gold jewelry to her. Satya's due jealousy and hatred towards Roop convinced her husband to give her possession of Roop's child. To which he agreed. Roop's pain can be seen when Sardarji gave Roop's first child to Satya. To quote Sardarji's words from the novel, "you will feel the joy of sacrifice, the happiness of giving. And don't worry, we will have another child" (Baldwin 200).

Sardarji without thinking about Roop's motherly feelings, asked her to give her child to his first wife as Satya impelled Sardarji to do so to conciliate her pain. Baldwin through these two female characters represents the suffering of women, whose lives revolves around their family and husband. Due to social conditioning, women become entrapped in the web of responsibilities and roles, which become the hindrance for their salvation. As seen in the novel, Roop couldn't bear the separation from her child and when she raised her voice for this injustice by retuning back to his father's house her sadness further aggravated when her father said,

“Beti, you should go back to him.... Go back, before the eyes of the world are turned upon us, before men in the village council begin raising questions about you” (Baldwin 307).

In the novel, we see that Roop remained at her father’s home and later Sardarji was asked by Roop’s brother Jeevan and her father to give back children to Roop as she is the mother. They also told him to keep Satya away. Later in the novel Satya was being seen isolated by her husband and she had to live separately at another mansion. Satya’s feeling as a woman can be quoted as per her monologue, “I am not wife, for my husband has abandoned me. I am not widow, for he still lives. I am not mother, for the son he gave me is taken away” (Baldwin 360).

In a traditional patriarchal society one can see through the novel how women’s life just revolves around the men they are associated with and they are only seen as daughters, wives, and mothers. They are deprived of their own independent identity. Woman is being controlled by the rules of fathers or brothers and once they get married, she is treated as a property of the husband.

Gendered violence

The novel also portrays the horrific episodes and experiences of the people during and after partition, especially focusing on women. As also seen in the novel, killing of Kusum, by her own father-in-law, who considers killing as a better option than seeing her getting raped by some enemy. Bachan Singh narrates the sorrowful sacrifice of Kusum to Roop. “I said the first lines of the Japji to give me strength, and to guide my Kirpan. Then she turned her back so I should not see her face, took off her chunni to bare her neck before me. And then” (Baldwin 521).

His actual fear is not the fear of violation of Kusum’s body by Muslims, but to protect the honor of his own family and community. Elisabeth Rehn and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf also opine that, “Violence against women is used to break and humiliate women, men, families, communities, no matter which side they are on. Women have become the worst victims of war”. (v)

During partition while crossing the borders women were the soft targets. Each community targeted women of other community, their bodies became the battle field and to sow the seed and dishonor the other community was the aim of the men of each community. In order to save the prestige of their women and community men killed women members of their families. To quote from the novel:

‘I made martyr of seventeen women and children in my family before their izzat could be taken. ‘I made martyrs of fifty’ The tales fly- Naked Sikh women were forced by Muslims to Sikhs to dance before Mosques. Naked Muslim women were forced by Sikhs to dance in the pound of the golden temple of Amritsar. (Baldwin 497)

The above lines depict the atrocities of women during partition time. Partition of India undoubtedly, shattered lives of millions of people but the disgrace suffered by women in the form of rape, femicide, abduction and non-acceptance by their own people is unfathomable. As the empirical data suggests, “Some 75,000 women were raped, kidnapped, abducted, forcibly impregnated by men of the “other” religion, thousands of families were split apart, homes burnt down and destroyed, villages abandoned” (Butalia 3).

Author also expresses the collective fear of women during conflict times through one of the incidents in the novel. When Roop was travelling from Lahore to Delhi, she was terrified and in constant fear of being raped, mutilated and converted to other religion. “Now I die, die young as Mama, without ever having seen Delhi. Or I am about to be raped, mutilated like the women whose breasts were cut off. Or my hair will be cut and I will be made to recite the kalima and then...” (Baldwin 480).

Partition left many women traumatized, as it made many women realize the two-fold nature of the societies they live in. On the one hand they were tortured, raped and mutilated by the enemies and on the other hand they were also killed by their own kinsmen. Women were left in conundrum because they had no place to go; women who survived the brutal tortures of rape and abduction were not even accepted by their own family members. Because their acceptance was seen as disgrace to the family or community they were related to. As they were seen as ‘tainted’ and they were forced to live either with their abductors or were abandoned and forced to live as a refugee. Shawna Singh Baldwin through *What the body remembers*, shows how women are considered as bearer of family honor, who are sacrificed from time to time in order to save the honor of family and community. In the work, author shows the dark side of patriarchal society where women become the worst victim during any turbulence in the society. As seen in the novel, during partition countless women were raped, tortured and murdered the violence inflicted on women left them in trauma. Therefore, we come to the conclusion that in this patriarchal society women always suffer both in the times of peace, as well as during conflict situation. Baldwin’s work contributes in portraying the agony of innumerable women before and after partition of India.

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