

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## REVISITING NATIONAL ALLEGORY: A POST-COLONIAL READING OF SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S *WHAT THE BODY REMEMBERS*

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### ABSTRACT

This article seeks to study Shauna Singh Baldwin's partition novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999) as a national allegory. In this novel Baldwin uses the personal narrative of woman as an allegory of the narrative of the nation and employs certain recurrent tropes – metaphoric as well as metonymic – like nature, woman's body, her womb, reproduction and childbirth to carry over from the private to public the desires and discontents of woman and inflect them in the larger cultural and political contexts of community and nation. The article argues that the allegorizing tendency of body-centered narrative in Baldwin's novel is not something limiting, but a discursive strategy of epistemic empowerment and resistance by women. As a strategy of resistance, the allegorical tendency also critiques nation and national history both being the monopoly of men from women's point of view and formulates self-identify through establishing the alterity of the "masculine" constructs of power and values.

**Key Words:** Post-Colonial Literature, Post-Colonial Feminism, National Allegory, Partition Novel.

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In his thought provoking essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986), Fredric Jameson draws a distinction between first and third world literature, arguing that in the first world literature that the representation of public and political domain of events and experiences get projected into the private and libidinal domain of the characters' consciousness. In the third world literature, however, private and libidinal domain of experience, situations, etc. are

being projected onto the public domain. He makes a generalization regarding all third world cultural productions and argues that all third world texts are to be understood as national allegories specifically in contrast to the situation of first world cultural and literary texts. He argues that there is a political dimension to third world texts that is now (and has perhaps long been) absent in their first world counterparts, and they are to be read as "national allegories," particularly when the form is novel:

Third world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third world culture and society. (320)

He goes on to add that in third world culture “telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (336). Notwithstanding the critical ripostes that Jameson’s essay has generated,<sup>1</sup> the point that there is a tendency to politicize private experiences holds good largely in the context of women partition writers still holds good by and large and quite relevant to my reading of *What the Body Remembers*. As Ananya Jahanara Kabir rightly remarks, the intensely private narratives of self-emancipation, trauma of partition, loss of innocence and utopia jostling with account of larger political events of India’s freedom struggle and the partition lend in Krishna Sobti’s *Zindaganinama* (1979), or Qurratulain Hyder’s *Fireflies in the Mist* (1979), or Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) a peculiarly complex dimension of the heterogeneity and conflict of factors of class, community and gender to nation and nationalism. “Such an intertwining of the personal, the political, and the topographical provides a gendered and culture-specific twist to Fredric Jameson’s claim that ‘all third world literature aspires to national allegory’”(185).

Recalling Jameson, Partha Chatterjee makes an interesting observation with regard to the third world nineteenth-century Indian autobiographical writings in his book *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1999). He says that men generally modulated their personal situation and experiences into the public sphere such as nation and succeeded in configuring a robustly confident self-identity with the result that their writings deserve the status of *carit* and *atmacarit*. He adds, in the women’s writings owing to the lack of such modulation of the private into the public, “the very theme of disclosure of self” remained “suppressed under a narrative of changing

times, changing manners, and customs, and changing values” (138). Further, Chatterjee writes, “The ‘new individual,’ it would seem, could represent the history of his life only by inscribing it in the narrative of the nation . . . . Not unexpectedly, autobiographies of women have characteristics rather different from those of men. It is not simply that women’s life stories are concerned more with the domestic than with the public sphere, a feature often noticed in women’s autobiographies of the modern period in all countries . . .” (138). Details of daily life lived within the network of families and kinsmen within “home” and those of social history smothered woman’s self so much that their writings were more familiarly known as *smritikatha* or “stories from memory,” failing to deserve the appellation merited by male autobiographical writings. What made the literary history of domestic life particularly suitable as a “feminine” literary genre was owing to the belief, particularly of their male guardians, that the literary conventions could accommodate writings by women that required little more than the retelling from memory of impressions left by direct personal experience (139). Woman’s writing as much as woman’s cultural identity in the contexts of national history and politics was still to come of age.

Chatterjee’s observation is pertinent to my article in so far as it points out to us the ideological and cultural compulsions of women to articulate self-identity in terms of family, community and tradition rather than in terms of nation and politics that male autobiographical writing had in plenty. This was at once the cause and manifestation of the lack of self-identity of women for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The nationalist project of the colonial native intelligentsia – as Chatterjee has shown – had its own type of resolution that consisted in rehabilitating women in the hallowed tradition of a highly mythical Indian cultural purity and authenticity. History and nationalist issues were the monopoly of men, as it were.

But in course of time a concatenation of radical political and cultural events in the West, particularly in the mid-1960s and 1970s, and concomitant rise of new-left thoughts, feminism, civil rights movement, anti-racist movement, etc.

politicized the western academia and the public sphere. The racially and economically marginalized intellectuals of the ex-colonies in South Asia and Africa – and among them the radical post-colonial women intellectuals – raised issues of third-worldism, race, class and gender discrimination in traditional as well as industrially advanced societies. The theoretical goals of post-modernist theories such as anti-foundationalism and opposition to the universalism of the Enlightenment and Fascist ideology combined with the post-structural practices of deconstructing and dismantling hegemonic cultural and literary discourses produced much larger consequences than imagined in the field of cultural studies. One of the consequences was a radical re-visioning of national history and interrogation of its hegemony, its elision, aporia and contradictions within the new discipline of Subaltern Studies.

In about the 1980s, in the revisionist historiography increasing attention was paid to several neglected aspects of social history, and the new mode of writing “history from below” included smaller histories of the masses from class, dalit and gender perspectives. In this critically rich and nuanced perspective, the promises and claims of the post-independence nation state and its triumphal narrative of anti-colonial struggle against the British and the much coveted independence came to be seen as part of a discourse that was falsely cohesive and coherent<sup>2</sup>. This politicization of identity and difference has underscored narratives of the nation not as an imaginary unified whole of male brotherhood as Benedict Anderson (1983) would have us believe; but a construct that is fragmentary, contested across divides of class, caste and gender; and re-interpreted in terms of new ideologies, myths and new histories. In this context one is reminded of Elleke Boehmer’s critique of Anderson in *A Feminist “Family Drama”: Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (2005) that weaves together postcolonial narrative and gender with the idea of nation to produce a gendered configuration of the postcolonial nation and point out thereby a blind spot in Anderson’s theory: the omission of the sexual makeup in his idea of nation as an imagined community and the implicit monologism in his theorization of the

nation. She takes pains to explicate a good number of texts imaging men ranging from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi through Jomo Kenyatta and Kenneth Kaunda to Michael Manley and Nelson Mandela under the appellations “father of the nation,” “son of the soil,” etc. whereas the postcolonial nations have been metaphorized as motherlands such as Mother Africa and Mother India or Bharat Mata (of course with the exception of Germany of Hitler who called Germany fatherland). This exercise amounts to driving home the point that men have largely sired the nation.

Boehmer, among many other postcolonial critics, produces the critical knowledge of the radical positions that women have taken to question the masculinist and homogeneous notion of the nation. In the Indian context, too, women have interrogated masculinist hegemony of the nation very effectively in the fields of social sciences, literary theory, and fiction. As far as fiction is concerned, those novels and stories that deal with the subject of the partition and the attendant changes in relationships through political turmoil, communal violence from the perspective of woman critically engage with the issues of nation. In such fiction, the personal story of the woman protagonists generally serves as the matrix of lived experience in which lie embedded a chain of events of the partition drawn from the history of the nation and the events of violence and displacement affecting public life. What is effected thereby is an allegorical turn of the personal into public.

I believe that the schema of narration outlined above deploys a strategy of immense epistemic empowerment of the female-self in the contemporary fictional narratives by women. It assigns to the female-self a legitimate space in history or the narrative of the nation, invests her with historical consciousness, makes her voice “public,” and turns her into an agent of knowledge/power. In this manner she liberates herself, crossing the political and cultural divide between the “home” and “outside,” created in the nineteenth century and zealously guarded until late into the twentieth century in the colonial *bhadralok* discourse, according to Chatterjee. As a strategy of resistance, the allegorical tendency also critiques nation and national history, both of which have been the

monopoly of men from women's point of view. It also formulates self-identity through establishing the alterity to the "masculine" constructs of power, values and cultural practices.

Woman writers often take up the tropes of mother, her corporeality and biology and politicize them to question the patriarchal power structure and the nation-state. Mahasweta Devi is an apt case in point. Inflecting the female body in terms of class, caste, and ethnicity she works it out as a subaltern body and lends voice and power to the powerless, invisible female subjects. She succeeds in forcing us to acknowledge the visibility and presence of the bare, naked body of the female subaltern, which history, society and the nation seem to exclude. But by dramatizing its struggle against the brutal infrastructure of the state and patriarchal society Mahasweta interrogates the nexus of power between feudal social system, capitalist economy, middle class and politics in India both prior to and after its independence.

For example, in her story "Draupadi," the female body in its sexually abused nudity confronts the state and challenges its brutal apparatuses. As for "Stanadayini," another story, the female body shows the commoditization of its reproductive capacity and lactating resources within the matrix of exploitative socio-economic relations. When this body is old, unserviceable and devastated by breast cancer, and it is abandoned by those whom it nourished, it raises disturbing ethical questions about human relationship. Whether used as metaphor or metonymy, female body through its biological victimization generates a discourse that underscores its linkage with land and commodity. Elsewhere, in yet another story "Doulati the Bountiful," the female body becomes an ironic trope of the motherland and a severe rebuke to the grandiose vision of social justice of post-independence India when it is forced into prostitution and ravaged by venereal disease. At the end it is found lying dead on a chalk-drawing of the map of the nation in a school yard on the Independence Day.

Mahasweta Devi's stories powerfully establish the fact that the corporeality of the female body can unleash a huge amount of thematic possibilities and subversive power in the fictional

writings by women. Since corporeality and reality are constantly juxtaposed as phenomenological correlates, and the thematic congruity as well as iconic similarity between woman and nation have long been established as part of the cultural nationalism of India to work out a semantic trajectory from sign to the subject, the allegorical turn of the female body to the nation becomes a natural corollary of fiction by women writers like Shauna Singh Baldwin.

The allegorizing tendency of body-centered narrative in Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* is a discursive strategy of empowerment and resistance. Baldwin reiterates the allegorical scheme of the novel in an interview with Rich Rennicks via e-mail:

I did not set out to write a partition novel at first but the allegory between the personal story of Satya and Roop, the two women in the polygamous marriage and their rivalry for children, which grew naturally into political.

Set in pre-partitioned India, mainly Punjab, *What the Body Remembers* (1999) is the story of Roop and Satya, co-wives of a Sikh engineer called Sardarji, and also allegorically it is tale of the partition of India. As Satya, the first wife of Sardarji bears no children, he takes a younger wife, Roop, in order to have a son. The country is torn apart by the events leading to the partition, as is Sardarji's family by the conflict between the women. Thus, narration of the relationship of the two co-wives, strained by mutual incriminations, becomes an allegory of the discontent of the two nations, India and Pakistan, "married to one conqueror" (407). As Satya claims the children of Roop, the latter feels dispossessed and plots to harm her. Roop does reclaim her children in a contest of power. As a consequence, Satya wastes herself away in grief and anger. She even chooses to die of consumption, allegorizing, as one might suspect, the circumstances in which Md. Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, died.

Allegory (etymologically from Greek: *ἄλλος*, *allos*, "other," and *ἀγορεύειν*, *agoreuein*, "to speak in public") is a figurative mode of representation conveying a meaning other than the literal; it is a symbolic fictional narrative that conveys a meaning not explicitly set forth in the narrative. In simpler

terms, it is a narrative in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived not only to make sense in themselves, but also to signify a second, correlated order of persons, things, concepts or events. In this scheme, as we will see, the personal thus becomes political in its search for the truth that lay hidden for long in the official narration of the nation. In this sense allegory becomes particularly significant for post-colonial writers “for the way in which it disrupts notions of orthodox history, classical realism and imperial representation in general” (Ashcroft, et al., *Post-Colonial Studies* 7). If postcolonial theory’s intention is to dismantle the colonizer’s rhetoric about history, it is best served by the indeterminacy at the heart of allegorical reference and the capacity of the allegorical rhetoric to signify several things at the same time. Because allegory is indeterminate in this way, allegorical narratives have recourse to multiple meanings, and the post-colonial writers use the ambivalence of allegory to create a space for subaltern voices within the narrative of nation. Stephen Slemon in “Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History” (1988) writes about relation of allegory and history thus:

Allegorical writing involves doubling or reduplicating extra textual material, and since the allegorical sign refers always to a previous or anterior sign, it is by definition invested in what Paul de Man calls a “rhetoric of temporality.” In other words, an awareness of the passage of time is at the heart of allegory . . . In the context of post-colonial cultures, however, the problem of history goes beyond the simple binary of either redeeming or annihilating the past . . . . (158)

He goes on to add, “What is unique to the allegorical representation of such details of colonial and post-colonial history, I think, is the fact that the allegorical levels of meaning that open into history are bracketed off by a literal level of fiction interpolated between the historical events and the reader so as to displace the matter of history into a secondary level of the text accessible only through the mediation of the primary fictional level” (160).

In the framework of semantic spillage discussed above the narration of the body and the self get amplified into the politics and history of the nation. In this context Rajeswari Sundar Rajan observes that the women novelists in their “nationalist” narratives follow the tradition of *The Midnight’s Children* and simultaneously address the “woman’s question,” most often simply by employing the expedient of replacing the male protagonist of the novel by a female. The story of this protagonist is then combined with the history of the nation in a number of ways suggested by *Midnight’s Children*—such as actual cause-and-effect connections between the individual protagonist’s life story and the country’s political events, or symbolic parallels between the one and the other, or coincidences, or the endowment of the protagonist with significant birth-dates or “magical” physical features (“The Feminist Plot” 76).

In *What the Body Remembers*, the elements of myths and symbols are incorporated into realism in a suitable narrative frame, with necessary semantic schema of the literal and symbolic interpretations of events and experiences. The canvas of the novel spans a fairly long stretch of history from 1928 to 1948, the years through which India hurtled towards the terrible moment of the partition. While the polarization of Indian society and politicization of communities began in 1925 with the foundation of Swayam Sevak Sangh, which has still been continuing as the ultra-rightist Hindu force and the ideological prime-mover of Bharatiya Janata Party, Viswa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal, 1948 was the year of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, first Indo-Pak war and communal clashes, which were all a painful legacy of the partition. These temporal markers thematize the experiences of the partition that are to be narrated in the personal world and the political world. The link—so essential for allegory between personal and political/ private and public spheres—has been worked out by Vayu, the mythological construct, the elemental force that not merely brings tidings of socio-political changes sweeping across the continent to determine its destiny, but also cause the changes historically. It is both chorus and *dues ex machina*, as it were, to borrow terms from Greek drama.

Soon after Roop's marriage with Sardarji her life will take a difficult and tortuous course leading to discord at home and a death. She leaves for Rawalpindi with her husband to her new home. Paralleling these developments in her private life political developments in the public life will come about: communal politics will intensify and the run-up for partition will begin. Using Vayu, the wind, as ingenious fictional tack, Baldwin brings snatches of information about disturbing political developments in far away Lahore, Punjab and Delhi thus:

As they cross the Leh River and enter Rawalpindi, the news Vayu brings from Lahore and Delhi to the fields of Punjab says that the moderates of the three-religion coalition have turned away from moderation. (154)

In making a commentary on the political situation of division, conflict that are apprehended as the outcome of the much awaited independence and birth of a democratic polity, the narrator uses then metaphor of theatre and the mythological episode of the game of dice in the *Mahabharata*:

Democracy rubs its hands in the wings and smiles its most benign smile. If the British leave India to the independence she is fighting for, Democracy will be ready to throw the dice and play the games of numbers with India's leaders across the unveiled face of India. Only once before, long before Kaliyug, the age of misfortune, in the days of which the *Mahabharat* tells, was there such a game of dice as begins in India today . . . (154)

In the above passage the links between history and mythology is maintained through the figuration of the new nation as Draupadi, who was claimed by her five husbands and whose destiny depended on their choice and compulsion. Although this is a polyandrous situation, and Satya has been forced into a polygamous situation, both entail an iniquitous social and sexual relationship between man and woman, given the pitiable status of woman in the inegalitarian Indian society where she had no right to property nor authority over children; she herself was a piece of property to be counted among the chattel owned by her man. Further, the novel shows that the institution of polygamy has

been one of the causes of the fragmentation of the Punjabi society into conflicting communal identities. Roop's grandfather had four wives, and that explains why Shyam chacha, her father Bachchan Singh's half-brother, is a Hindu, who gets eventually estranged from her father when sectarian fissures develop in the society. For their part, Satya and Roop vie with each other to win the affection and favour of their husband, and their family breaks up. Elsewhere in the novel, Satya imagines herself as Sita when Sardarji takes Roop as second wife and abandons her:

To Sardarji, standing tall and proud behind the red settee in the wedding photo on the desk she says, 'Oh, fear not for yourself Sardarji, for I still love you the way foolish Sita loved her Ram after he spurned her.' (359-60)

Both women image themselves in terms of mythological characters in situations similar to those in the great epics in order to impose an interpretive order on the chaotic situation that unfolds beyond their control, but also to come to terms with themselves. As far as these two rival co-wives are concerned what remain at stake are fertility, reproduction and motherhood. Satya is old, jaded, infertile and biologically handicapped, but Roop is not all perfect either. She is deaf in one ear, and may suffer rejection for this reason from a prospective groom but for her beauty, youth and the capacity to conceive children. All these factors can compensate for her poor background. She wins Sardarji over, much to the dismay of Satya, who noticed the "proof of his favour—Roop's body thickening to ripeness. Two children, proof of her fertility and Satya's failure" (281). Motherhood marks the fulfillment of a woman's life, and that is what Roop has been taught by her Nani (Maternal Grandmother), who says to her this is "what we women are for" (48).

One cannot but notice the use of vegetative metaphor to describe Roop's pregnancy. Baldwin repeatedly employs certain vegetative metaphors drawn from nature to describe childbirth and lactation well within the scheme of male/female dichotomy in terms of culture/nature. In the very beginning of the novel, Roop's Pothwari skin is told to be "smooth as a new apricot beckoning from the

limb of a tall tree" (15), while Satya is compared to a rotten apricot. Elsewhere in a dream Satya saw Roop sleeping between her and Sardarji and observed that *"her body pale and hairless, limbs supple and careless. And from between Roop's legs there sprouts apricot buds ready to open into flowers. And Sardarji plucks these, one by one, and gives them to me"* (27). Apricot, it is interesting to observe, has associations with conception and child birth<sup>3</sup> in literature, and its resonance of fertility and progeny in Baldwin's novel enriches the semantic texture. Occurring in the context of the partition this vegetative image intertwines itself with the metaphor of mother earth to point out the significant fact that both woman and earth are valued for their fertility. Baldwin's use of symbolic images like the apricot, recurrent images of blood, the wind God Vayu, etc. and use of numerous metaphors and metonymic images contributes to the allegorical level of meaning.

One more image that runs as a motif is the phulkari shawl. Mama's (mother's) phulkari shawl is always with Roop. During the partition Roop gave her maid Mani Mai a Kashmiri jamavar shawl "to protect her till they meet again" (450). At Delhi she gives Jorimon (her Muslim maid) her mother's phulkari shawl with the hope that it will protect her also. Shauna Singh Baldwin herself also always wore a shawl while writing the novel because she believes the shawl is a symbol of protection: "I always put on a shawl when I write, because it takes me back to India. Any shawl will do, as long as it's around my shoulders. It's the symbolism of the shawl: as protection" (qtd. in Methot). Although the shawl has symbolic value and personal significance for Baldwin, it has larger cultural significance and discursive value in the context of the novel.

In a perceptive essay "Embroidering the Past: *Phulkari* Textiles and Gendered Work as Tradition and Heritage in Colonial and Contemporary Punjab" (1999), Michelle Maskiell studies the cultural economy of phulkari shawls and other forms of embroidery since the colonial times to the present and treats these as artifacts of the folk culture tradition of Punjab, which were valorized in the colonial discourse as denominators of highly localized identities of culture. She observes:

The colonial state tied the study of the folk to an image of India that was fragmented and powerfully localized . . . Colonial India as a living museum of many traditions had no unitary national essence on which it would be possible to build a modern state. Foreign rule alone provided the rational patriarchal framework that could link the many local traditions together, or so Raj officials reasoned. Urban middle and upper-class women and men challenged this reasoning by locating a universal essence in Indian spirituality. However, as cultural nationalists wrested the reinterpretation of Indian aesthetics and art from British authority on this basis, they also found that a gendered understanding of the folk was the key for their own notions of cultural self-determination and political independence. (373)

In other words, both imperial discourse and anti-colonial, nationalist discourse (a derivative discourse a la Partha Chatterjee) hijacked the local forms of cultural economy for their own respective agendas. Maskiell's study helps us understand that while the colonial discourse of Indian folk traditions within the registers of ethnography and anthropology was part of official surveillance and epistemic control for the effective governance of the empire, the nationalist discourse of the indigenous elite fetishized gendered (feminine) cultural artifacts and reinforced the aesthetic tradition and cultural heritage of an authentic, pristine pre-colonial India. In the process what was cleverly sidelined was the materialist understanding that handcrafts and cultural artifacts have re-produced and still do re-produce the iniquitous gender differences in culture and economy to exploit women (and also children) by extracting from them cheap labour and skill. That folk tradition in the masculinist nationalist imaginary becomes a museum-like space for the preservation of Indian femininity at best and a prison house for its entrapment at worst is what Baldwin's phulkari motif gestures towards, perhaps without her knowledge. Even Roop's apparently innocuous reflective question: "Why can they not be like Kashmiri shawls and choose their owners?" means

much more than she intends. What she means is why women cannot be given the liberty to choose husbands like they did in the mythical past. But the semantic effect of her question is: why should women not have the prerogative and agency of choosing and inventing tradition in the nationalist context like men because while Phulkari is identified as women's work, traditionally Kashmiri Shawl embroidery has been regarded as a male preserve. This type of semantic spillage across signifiers—from phulkari shawl to tradition, from *swayamvar* and the radical desire for the invention of nationalist tradition that Hobsbawm has talked about in his *Nations and Nationalisms*—instantiates the allegorical turn of the narrative.

The allegorical schema of meaning is enriched by different scenes in the novel which have a layer of meaning outside the immediate context. The bloody fight between Bachan Singh and Abu Ibrahim's patridges prefigures the bloody violence of the partition between Hindu/Sikh and Muslim community. It is evident from the authorial comment, "the crowd thins, exchanging predictions for the future battles—the next fight is always bloodier, always more violent" (47). The historical backdrop of the novel being the partition that was characterized by violence and bloodshed, the image of blood recurs in several scenes. Both Satya and Roop had their vision of blood replete with rich symbolic overtones. Such repetition of signs, or the doubling structure and polyvalence of figures, operate at the heart of what Slemon calls the "post-colonial allegory."

Post-colonial allegory becomes a common strategy of resistance in post-colonial texts. Slemon finds Jameson's view on third world novels as national allegory a Euro-centric notion of allegory and suggests that it is a valuable form in which post-colonial literature may conduct forms of *counter-discourse* ("Monuments of Empire" 11). In "Post-Colonial Allegory and the Transformation of History," he explains further,

. . . Whatever the specific tactic, the common pursuit is to proceed beyond a "determinist view of history" by revising, reappropriating, or reinterpreting history as a concept, and in doing so to articulate new "codes of recognition" within which those

acts of resistance, those unrealized intentions and those re-orderings of consciousness that "history" has rendered silent or invisible can be recognised as shaping forces in a culture's tradition. (Slemon 159)

In *What the Body Remembers*, Baldwin employs the narrative of female body as a national allegory to enable her female protagonists to overcome the state of subjugation and bondage to patriarchal form of power that their bodies subject them to. Both Satya and Roop protest with their bodies. Satya's resistance comes in the form of self-chosen dissolution and death of her body. She willingly contacted tuberculosis and kills herself in protest against the patriarchal order with the hope that "there will come a time when just being will 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 *sakti* takes shape and walks the world again" (362). During the partition, her voice in the form of radical consciousness whispers to Roop the subversive meaning of self-killing and murder of women during the partition of the subcontinent that needs to be remembered in the nationalist history:

Why does a woman choose to die?

A shadow woman whispers in Roop's ear, 'Sometimes we choose to die because it is the only way to be heard and seen, little sister'. (526)

The self-killing in question is thus a patently radical act to counter all forms of honour-killing that the patriarchal society legitimated for upholding the honour of the community. Even when death of the female protagonist is not suicidal, it still carries a lot of radical potential if it occurs as an event in an oppressive society and polity. One is reminded of Sujata's death in Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084*. She dies from a burst appendix, and this incident, though downplayed by her husband as nothing more than a biological misfortune, assumes in the narrative enormous radical potential. Since she is a mother who shores up the memories of Brati, her Naxalite son through her body in the face of a calculated amnesia of the family, society and the

state, she foregrounds her own death as a gesture of protest.

In the moment of her death, Satya passes on part of her spirit and her character to her co-wife Roop:

And in that breath, Satya joins the virulence of her unremitting anger to Roop's hope. For the one long moment that Roop feels the smoulder of Satya's anger, the open wound of Satya's humiliation passes past flesh, past bone, past breath. For that moment, Satya's desires flame within Roop, and her times and Roop's grasp hands, dance forward, the balance between Word and Silence restored for just one instant. (378)

Roop shares Satya's anger, her desires, her humiliations as parts of "collective memory" of women and learns her connection to a history of the devaluing of women's lives. Satya enters Roop's thought in her atonement. Drawing strength from Satya she rejects the English names given to her children by their English tutor Miss Barlow. When Satya's forceful personality overpowers Roop, it gives her the strength to challenge the Muslim soldiers on her way to Delhi. Though Roop's claiming the self began with a claim to her children (the products of her body), she was still voiceless. All she did was to go to her father's home as a protest when the children were taken away from her and given to the childless Satya. But the experiences of the partition makes her a changed woman—more convinced, confident, coming to her own power of judgement and capable of speaking on her own behalf. Her subjectivity, which has been stymied inside her heavily oppressed body, bursts out in rebellion, and she parades naked on the railway platform in the aftermath of the partition only to make others see "a woman's body without shame" and as "no man's possession." This is as bold and radical a gesture comparable to Mahaswata Devi's Dopdi when she challenges the masculinist oppression of the State power to parade her naked body that has been raped and battered before the Senanayaka in the police station. Roop's exhibitionism is a protest against dishonour both the communities of Hindus and Muslims have

perpetrated upon woman's body by ironically inscribing on it the brutal sign of the triumph and honour of their nation. It is a decisive act that imposes sequence and meaning on the welter of images that shape and define Roop's sense of self. Roop's fear of her body which has developed throughout the years beginning from her childhood subsides. The event provides Roop with a self and asserts her subject position. Finally, when she tells Sardarji about her one bad ear (534), the imperfection of her body which she fears may lead to her banishment, she overcomes her fear of body, and her transformation is complete.

Roop and Satya protest and they are transformed. But Roop's sister-in-law Kusum becomes a passive victim of history without claiming recognition. She was killed by her father-in-law and became a "martyr" to save the so called purity of the religion and the community. When Kusum's story enters Roop's body, it becomes a collective experience – the story of women in general. Roop decides to remember, re-member Kusum's body, will tell her children Kusum's story. The author speaks through her character here. Roop becomes a voice of Baldwin when she insists that the violence against Kusum be spoken aloud and remembered. Baldwin's novel reveals great capacity for intervening in the masculinist nationalist discourse and historiography via allegorical retelling of the collective trauma of partition through body as a means of resistance. By providing alternative visions and versions of the past from Sikh women's view of partition, the novel restores them to their places within history of the nation, constructs her-story and in the process produces "counter discourse".

#### Notes:

1. For an insight into the debate generated by Jameson's essay see Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (Fall 1987): 3-25; Thomas Palakeel, "Third World Short Story as National Allegory?" *Journal of Modern Literature* 20.1 (Summer 1996): 97-102; Imre Szeman, "Who is Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.3 (2001): 803-827.

2. For a detailed and more illuminating treatment of the subject of rewriting history of

partition see, Jonathan D. Greenberg, "Generations of Memory: Remembering Partition in India/Pakistan and Israel/Palestine," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 25.1 (2005): 89-110; Mushirul Hasan, "Memories of a Fragmented Nation: Rewriting the Histories of India's Partition," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33.41 (Oct. 10-16, 1998): 2662-2668; Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32.2 (Apr. 1990): 383-408; Alok Bhalla, "Memory, History and Fictional Representations of the Partition," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34.44 (Oct. 30 - Nov. 5, 1999): 3119-3128; Jill Didur's "Fragments of Imagination: Re-thinking the Literary in Historiography through Narratives of India's Partition", *Jouvert* 1.2 (1997).

3. Apricots have an association with both conception and abortion in the literary tradition. In Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* (Act II Sc. I) Bosola gives unripe apricots to the Duchess to hasten her delivery of Antonio's baby and confirm thereby that she is pregnant. In Chapter 22 of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Rodolphe Boulanger sends the pregnant Emma Bovary a basketful of strong smelling apricots, which she eats ravenously to fall sick.

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