

**TRAUMA OF PARTITION AND BIGAMY CONFLICT AS  
DEPICTED BY SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN IN  
*WHAT THE BODY REMEMBERS***

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**Abstract**

*What the Body Remembers, a novel by Shauna Singh Baldwin deals with the theme of bigamy, which produces a wide range of conflicts and tensions in an individual's life. The novel presents the problem and various ordeals faced by young Roop, as a second wife of forty plus Sardarji, a bureaucrat engineer. The novel reflects her longings, losses and compromises in her life journey. On most of the occasion, Roop appears as a halting and stumbling character, yet she tries to go ahead in her life and struggles for self- identity, the space for existence in her married life. Like every young Indian woman, Roop too confronts traumas of loneliness, pangs of isolation, search for identity and subjugation by male as well as women dominating forces in her life journey. Despite all crises, within the family and on the occasion of disastrous partition of the nation, she truly emerges as a 'New woman' in the end of the novel.*

**Key words:** *bigamy, lonely, subjugation, exploitation, partition surrogate mother*

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Shauna Singh Baldwin, an Indo-Canadian writer, who belongs to the Sikh community, was born in Montreal and her family returned to India in 1972, when Shauna was ten. Her debut novel *What the Body Remembers*, was published in 1999. On April, 14<sup>th</sup>, 2000 she became the recipient of Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best book in the Canada Caribbean region. The present novel has been translated into fourteen languages. Shashi Tharoor, an eminent creative write in Indian English literature described this novel, as deeply felt, richly evocative novel, and addresses as a major literary voice.

A common reading of novel projects the theme of partition between India and Pakistan. But on the deeper level or personal level the novel is about the protagonist Roop who belongs to Sikh family and she who face the hazards, hurdles occurred on the way of fulfillment of self identity. In this epic-marathon novel, Baldwin has covered almost two decades of period from 1928 to 1947. The novel is developed on two parallel lines – general as well as personal. On general level, the novel depicts trauma of partition – the unfortunate partition of unique Hindustan. However, major part of the novel deals with the characters like, Roop, Sardarji and Satya and through them Baldwin explores the self-division that exists in India in which feudal and secular values try to make a space for each other. The novelist has presented the unfortunate partition through eyes of a Sikh woman and graphically portrays the gendered aspect of partition violence.

The novel begins with the flashback technique, where, Roop a sixteen year old young attractive girl from a village called Pari Darvaza is presented as

a newly married wife of forty two years old Sardarji. It was a second marriage of Sardarji, on the ground that his first wife Satya, since long time failed to give him a son as an ancestor to his family. The marriage takes place against the view of Satya, but as there was no alternative, she accepts Sardarji's decision with a personal grudge in her mind. In the opening scene, she has invited Roop to her sitting room to observe her beauty and her physical appearance, but here also reflects her womanish envy and jealousy, instead of curiosity, love and tenderness towards her. As in the bull market, while purchasing a bull, a farmer thoroughly scrutinized a bull, Satya too observed and thoroughly scrutinized Roop's appearance. This occasion is described by Baldwin as:

She examines Roop's tooth and finds all of them whole, the back ones barely visible. She hopes that as they come they will bring pain. Roop's tongue is soft and a healthy pink and from it a man will hear no truths he cannot explain away. She presses her fingers to Roop's cheekbones, they are high, like her own (16).

A major portion of the novel deals with the predicament of bigamy which produces a wide range of conflicts and tensions, and in the process of development of the novel it is woven dexterously as a core part of the novel. Like Bharati Mukherjee's protagonist, Jasmine, Baldwin's Roop too appears adventurous and determined young girl but unluckily born under the influence of the powerful 'Mangal Star' in her horoscope. Another drawback in her personality was that she was deaf on her one side of the ear. Though there was adverse family background especially on financial level, yet Roop was very positive and optimistic, that she will be married to a rich man. And while giving this confidence to her father; she says: "My kismet is still good, don't worry, Papaji. Jyotish Sunder Chand said I have good kismet. Didn't he say I'll marry a rich man?" (92). She is different type of young girl, she had her own whims and reckless ideas about her life. She did not want to be anyone's servant and even did not want to learn cooking and daily chores, but she had no other alternative.

It was the time, when Roop has passed however the tenth standard by applying herself at the end of the school, just before examination. Nevertheless, Bachan Singh had no haste for Roop's marriage, as she was very young. He also thought that there were no Sikhs eligible in birth status of equality in Pari Darvaza and even proposals have not come from caste Sikh families in village around for her. One day unexpectedly the landlord Sardar Kushal Singh visits to Bachan Singh's house with the marriage proposal of Roop' for his forty two years old, brother-in-law, named Sardarji. Bachan Singh has initially hesitated and unwilling for this unmatched proposal. But his gratefulness towards Sardar Kushal Singh, however, does not permit him to refuse bluntly the proposal. He very seriously ponders, how can he give his beautiful, young and tender daughter's hand to middle-aged married man's hand? He was a jagirdar as well as an Executive Engineer in an Irrigation Department at Khanewal, with a degree from Balliol in Engineering. Sardar Kushal Singh proposes Roop as Sardarji's second wife on the ground that he was sure that she would accept and follow sincerely all the domestic norms of a family. Sardarji was well aware that Roop was not only young and beautiful but her virtue has also been well protected by her family. In his point of view she was as if like '24 carat gold' and not 'a dupe brass'.

Bachan Singh appeared totally bewildered on the proposal brought by Sardar Kushal Singh and remained silent. On this enigmatic state it was, Roop, herself came forward to break her father's silence and gave her consent to this polygamous proposal. It was for the first time that Bachan Singh realized his daughter's sensible nature. She appears very considerate and wise in accepting this proposal, at the same time she was keen to marry Sardarji because he was rich and socially respected person. At this juncture, she behaves like a fully grown up and matured young girl. Her innocence and ignorance has now moulded her to visualize marriage as a passport and freedom from endless restrictions and confines, something that would, 'open the world a little wider'. And her prolonged dream of, being a rich man's wife that was cherished dream by her also tempts her for the decision. On the other hand, she was well aware about the economic limitations of her father and hence no other rich Sikh man

will propose to her. At the same time her physical deformity of being deaf on one side of the ear, was also one of her hidden weaknesses. At the same time, she has 'Mangal' in her fate and as asserted by Jyotish Sunderchand the same was there in Sardarji's fate, as he was born on Tuesday. So both their horoscopes matched properly. Thus on these grounds Roop's choice of Sardarji's second wife proves very wise and considerate decision. And the marriage ceremony has been performed just in a formal way and in a compact manner, as without any band, any wailing shehnai, no trumpets. Even to make available money Bachan Singh, very laden heartedly, sold his family's dearest horse. Baldwin aptly observed polygamous marriage status of Roop as:

Roop should appreciate her good fortune. She has been married, despite papaji misfortunes, despite having no mother to arrange her marriage, despite being born under the very strong influence of the Mangal Star, despite having one bad ear. (164)

Roop was so ignorant and unfamiliar to the modern things, that on an occasion after marriage ceremony was over, Sardarji, her husband, arrives by driving his American made Desoto car to take Roop with him. Actually, Roop thought that she will be taken away in a palanquin as her Mama, Madani and Kusum had been taken away. On that occasion Sardarji informs her, about his Desoto car : "I ordered all the way from America and it came to Bombay by sea – Americans call this colour chocolate brown" (153). But ignorant and unfamiliar to modern world, Roop has never before seen chocolate, so she remained unperceived about what chocolate brown means. Using the ladder of social institution of 'marriage', bureaucrat Executive Engineer, like Sardarji, just selfishly wanted a son a descendent from, Roop's fertile and fresh womb, because his first dearest wife Satya proves to be barren. Here, Baldwin wants to draw the reader's attention towards a system, that how Indian women are treated like machines for production of an heir, who would carry forward the name of their ancestors.

The most striking and riveting character of the present novel is Sardarji's

first wife, Satya. In some ways Satya whose name means 'truth', is presented a very unusual and strong character in her own rights and as a counterpart to Roop. She was a woman, who has never lowered her eyes in front of her husband. She was of 42, of her husband's age. Still she was beautiful and graceful in manners. The only drawback of her life was that she was barren, which forced Sardarji for the second marriage. This biting and pungent reality of Satya converts her into jealousy and envy for Roop. She has never lost the opportunity to subvert and underestimate her. On the other hand by hook or by crook, she always tries to win the favour of her husband. It was unbearable for her that no woman except her, could share him. After getting married to Roop Sardarji brings her to Kushal Singh's house to avoid the direct confrontation to Satya, who was upto this time totally ignorant about the secret marriage. But after disclosing the truth, Roop sees her, who was raging like some 'churail' in the courtyard. Sometimes Sardarji becomes putty in the hands of Satya'.

Even in her bitter anger Satya has been reminding and posing a question to Sardarji : "Did I not tell you I – I myself – Would find you a woman?" (165). It clearly indicates that ego of that ambitious woman had got hurt. And her fierce appearance was more like that of a wounded lioness, and Sardarji's condition was like that of a 'petitioner'. And when it was unbearable to him to lose his patience, he bursts like a thunder to her by saying: "I know you very well, too – you have a tongue sharper than Kakeyi's. I tell you, I am so tired of your shouting" (166). So Satya's ferocious appearance was also forthcoming threat signal or challenge to Roop's existence as a second wife of Sardarji. Whether she will overcome confidently to this roaring tempest or will she yield? But the question arising about her to Roop does not bother her, because since her childhood Roop has learnt to be positive from her elders. Thus Roop was totally distinct from Satya. Lovingly Sardarji addresses her as his 'little brown koyal'.

With the arrival at Sardarji's house the whole sophistication process takes place in the life of Roop, in the lunch instead of just daal and roti, as in Papaji

home, now she has glass of sweet lassi, chicken reshmi-kababs, lamb chapli-kababs and mint raita, such unknown items were placed before her. It was the first time that she was enjoying such a delicious meal. Thus whatever she has cherished as a dream before marriage, now it was truly converting into reality. Now, cunning Satya began to over dominate Roop, and never lose chance to play tricks of jealousy or envy over her. To prevent her from tempting Sardarji into visiting her room, shrewdly she has ordered Roop to sleep beside her every afternoon. But as Roop was submissive natured and as per Sardarji's request, she respects her as like elder sister and always remained downcast to Satya. Roop's moral teaching never permits her to compete with Satya. The conflict in the novel occurs in the form of Satya to young innocent Roop. On the other hand, Satya has created the false impression to Sardarji, that she loves Roop.

After passing of few months after marriage, Roop was pregnant and it was great rejoicing moment for Sardarji that soon he will be a father. While she was pregnant Sardarji has taken her for a evening walk to Weedy canal. In this walk and talk between them he says to her :

‘Women need babies’, .. They grow sick and quarrelsome without children to look after. They become shrill and loud. They threaten terrible things. They might even curse. They become quite truly unbearable ... ‘Roop, I must satisfy her’ (199).

Thus, it was her husband who pleaded and persuaded her like a petitioner in a problem solving request that Roop, after giving birth to a baby, should have to give it to Satya. He suggested this to Roop, as if she was brought by him like a baby producing machine from the market of Pari Darvaza. Thus, Roop's self-identity was as if in peril or at a stake. So Sardarji indirectly would like to suggest her to assist him to learn his wishes and should follow him as Sita follows Ram. In her loneliness, sometimes Roop was also frightened that if she protests the decision taken by Sardarji, she might be sent to her home for disobedience. And the people in her village will gossip about it and Papaji's

status will be damaged. Hence, Roop's present predicament was like that of Sita's, agni-pariksha-the ordeal. It was helpless search for self-identity in that bureaucrat family and her present status was like that of forlorn alienated state.

It was expectation and curiosity of a son by everybody, and despite the whole canal colony's fervent expectations, hopes, blessings, prayers as well as Mani Mai's prayers to her Allah, Roop gives birth to a baby child. Once while Mani Mai massaging her aching legs, she said the bitter words of Satya : "Bari Sardarni says you have bad kismet. She says you have brought too much of Mangal's influence to this and it will not allow you to make boys" (206). And when Roop orders Atma Singh for a cup of tea, it was wicked Sastya, instead of sugar, has added a salt into it. It was also sheer paradox that a woman like Satya who unables to give birth to children for last twenty four years, now she has been blaming Roop for a baby girl and her 'Mangal Star' influence. On the other hand, she was conveniently neglecting that Sardarji too has a strong influence of Mangal Star. Satya was almost at the age of Roop's mother, instead of giving her affection, envy and jealousy that were ever reflected by her. Sardarji has planned to bestow his first barren wife, Satya the status of motherhood without the pains of delivery. And on this background, Roop's status was merely appearing not different from a surrogate mother. As it was desired by Sardarji, the newly born baby was named as 'Pavan', "Little breeze" (217). and the possession of a baby was handed over to barren Satya, only to please her. On the side of Roop it was her noble sacrifice just to maintain her identity.

Another drawback in Roop's character was that she was somewhat timid type of personality. She has different types of fear, like that whether next child might be a son and it too will be deprived from her by Satya, in Sardarji's absence. Especially at night she has feeling of terror of loneliness, as well as incessant stress of demand of son from Sardarji and others. Sometimes, Roop has also the fear of her renunciation by Sardarji under the misguidance of Satya. Meanwhile, Roop gave birth to a son for the second time. Roop was very well aware that she will soon be separated from her into the custody of Satya.



Contemptuously, Satya's treatment to Roop was like that of maid, Mani Mai, as if both came from the same family.

However, Sardarji was very noble in his thought; he has cherished a dream that his son will be a scientist like his father and wanted to send him to England to study. But before that he thought he will send him to better school to learn Latin. Everybody was thinking on his own way but nobody never concern or to take into consideration of wretched Roop, who has given birth after nourishing nine months in her womb. Satya was so selfish to claim a son as hers, whereas Sardarji thinking about his son's future education, and Roop's status merely appears as surrogate mother. Though Sardarji got married to Roop, as per Sikh tradition, and his responsibility was to treat her as equal to Satya, yet unknowingly he treats her as if like a Chinese toys or things, like 'use and throw. Though, Sardarji lovingly calls her as his 'little brown koel' yet he was totally unaware that her status was merely like 'little black crow'. When the possession of Roop's son Timcu handed over to Satya, immediately, Satya has sent back Roop's daughter Pavan to Roop through Joriman by saying; "She does not need a girl now. Two children are two much to look after (268). Thus, it indicates Satya's selfishness and meanness by her behaviour.

The conflicts of two wives over securing power in the household and favour of husband appear in the novel as a kernel part of the novel. Each tries to become Sardarji's integral part – Roop with her beauty and Satya with her mind. Ultimately the climax of the co-wives' clash reaches to that point, when Roop left Rawalpindi and reaches to Pari Darvaza and decided never to turn up to the Sardarji's house, as there was no other alternative remained for her. Any married woman, to some extent, could endure abduction of her property, wealth or even ornaments but she will never endure the abduction of her children, the lump of her flesh and bone, by the others. On his return from foreign tour instead of a welcome by Roop, he has received a letter from Bachan Singh, which asked him to come to Pari Darvaza and to speak to her father. Partially, he was ignorant about all the happenings with Roop, from Satya. On one way it was not submissive Roop's rebel or challenge to Sardarji, but she has

always respect and honour for Sardarji. It was her breathing relief in free air from stifling atmosphere created by Satya . After realizing the seriousness of the matter, the humiliated Sardarji humbly promises to Bachan Singh and Jeevan, that he will restore the position of Roop as a wife and the children will be with her, as well as to run household without Satya's interference.

In soon time Sardarji along with Roop shifted to Lahore and left Satya behind in Rawalpindi with only his Manager Abdul Aziz and two servants to tend her. Thus, Roop's lost glory now has been revived and the loneliness, which was imposed by Satya on her, was now inflicted as a boomerang to her by the recent developments. Due to the recent happenings now first time Satya feels stifled at being marginalized and slighted. She could not tolerate the separation of Sardarji and contracts a terrible disease of tuberculosis from her diseased cousin, Mamta, through a European kiss. She voluntarily invites death a sort of redemption from present insults heaped on her. It was not her relinquishment or surrender but it was her ultimate ghastly strategy to draw the attention of her husband by this unusual way. During the last moments of Satya, first time Roop sensed an affinity with her. She understands and imbibes Satya's anger, pride and ambition within her, as it is indicated through the title and narrative of the novel.

In the last four chapters (from 38 to 41) Baldwin has depicted very realistically the horror and pangs of unfortunate India-Pak partition, on 15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947. On the previous day of it, that was 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1947, Sardarji takes the decision of sending his wife Roop, two sons and a daughter to India. Actually, he was worried about his daughter's safety, as he had witnessed atrocities committed on women by all communities. On her way to Delhi, Roop faces critical situations very bravely. Not only does she take her along with her children in her car, she also protects herself from being raped by a group of army-men. "Jurrat Kahan se aiee? How do you dare?! ... My brother is very senior Major. I will have court-martilled for this" (481). The entire scene is filled with Roop's rare heroism. Roop here transcends all the boundaries of class, gender and religion. Her earlier timidity takes place with

immense courage, responsibility, and strong confidence in her. On the other hand, Sardarji and his servant Atma Singh, had somewhat similar kind of traumatic experiences in dealing with the Muslim fanatics while returning to Delhi from Lahore. It was Muslim Burhan-e-din Pathan, who safely rescued Sardarji from violence and he took Sardarji to railway station and ultimately along with Atma Singh, Sardarji however reached Delhi safely.

Later on, Roop benevolently poised herself to take charge of refugees in Delhi. She organized prayers for those who lost a son, a husband, a mother and a daughter and also sent food to the camps. To some extent, violence due to partition was unaffected to Sardarji and Roop's family, but on the other hand Baldwin presented Jeevan's wife, Kusum's death in heroic mode as martyrdom and as an example of tolerance. Bachan Singh, Kusum's father-in-law beheaded her by using a kirpan for the sake of 'honour' or 'izzat' because he considers Kusum's sacrifice as an inevitable response to the violent times. But the depiction of submissive young character Kusum's role appears as it is an injustice for portraying in heart-rending manner. It appears that as compared to the protagonist, Roop, Baldwin has allotted tragic incidents to other young characters like Kusum who confronted death meekly, just to maintain izzat (status) of the family, and even her elder sister Madani to face trauma's of partition, who lost her husband.

However, Baldwin's present novel appears truly impressive for its realistic description of pre-Independence India and later on subsequent trauma and tribulation of the partition. Like Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) Baldwin very dexterously presented the two levels on which novel developed – the general and the personal. But like Kapur, Baldwin too has, much focused the flood of light on personal level, where we witness Sardarji, Satya and Roop as memorable characters. Like Kapur, Baldwin has presented the predicament and ordeal of bigamy marriage in Indian society. But above all the character of Roop emerges through the novel as a memorable character who stands for her submissiveness, humble and loving nature. Yet she became the victim of circumstances, jealousy and envy of the woman as a co-wife. Sometimes due to

her submissiveness she restricted merely to the identity of 'surrogate mother' and faced subverted status within the house and even in the society. Reviewing the present novel on web, eminent Indian English novelists, Amit Choudhari observes:

The novel explores the self-division that exists in India in which feudal and secular values try to make a place for each other, such as Satya and Roop do in their husband's house. It is a self-division that leads not only to the particular neuroses of the marriage, but culminates in the political violence of the country's partition that will come later. (Website)

In the same context, in an article Seema Malik aptly observes the novel as 'a protest against the humiliation of women's dignity'. She says: "The novel is a protest against the humiliation of women's dignity, their exploitation and the injustice meted out to them". (Malik 203-204).

In an interview Baldwin too makes it clear the intention behind writing the novel. As she says:

I didn't set out to write a partition novel at first, but the allegory between the personal story of Satya and Roop, the two Sikh women in the polygamous marriage, and their rivalry for the children grew naturally into political. ... At the end of this novel, no one is a winner just as a partition – each community compromised its humanity and so each community last. (Website)

The word, 'Body' used in the title in a significant and apt manner, for example as a second wife Roop's body proves very significant for giving birth to children as heir or successor to Sardarji. On the contrary, Satya's body proves as void and sterile for the same, but she glorifies it by accepting voluntary death by consuming or inviting the disease in the same body and her body consummates for eternal. In the same manner, the serenity if Sikh

community is very significantly displayed by Kusum, the daughter-in-law of Bachan Singh who offers her necked and whose body was beheaded and cut down into six pieces and even her womb was ripped out by Muslim fanatics. So the title is apt and significant. Through the novel Baldwin glorifies Sikh's contribution, their sacrifices and trauma and tribulation faced by most of the Sikh women at the time of partition.

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