

WOMAN AS THE “OTHER”: A STUDY OF SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN’S

WHAT THE BODY REMEMBERS

SADAF JAMAL¹ & RAJNI SINGH²

¹Junior Research Fellow, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian School of Mines University, Police line
Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian School of Mines University, Police line
Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India

ABSTRACT

Culture establishes well defined roles for men and women, thus separating their rights by drawing clear lines. The present paper aims at unraveling the status of ‘woman’ in the patriarchal society governed by its dual value system. For the purpose, it explores Shauna Singh Baldwin’s Commonwealth award winning novel, *What the Body Remembers* in the light of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Baldwin attempts to break the androcentric ideology and reinvent the lives of women, also fulfilling her implicit political aim by posing questions and suggesting re-assessment. Her concern for society and woman projects her philosophy and inner being. She has also tried to divulge the psyche of the female victim, suffering under false ideologies and value system of the oppressive society. Through her incredible novel, she has shown the anger of a soul that has been reincarnated once again as a girl- same soul destined to live the same story of trauma.

Baldwin propagates her message to fight against oppression, inequality and gender discrimination as these are the biggest social evils with dangerous repercussions, threatening the very notion of equality and social justice. The struggle of strong-willed women and girl-children against patriarchy is something that Singh Baldwin understands and expresses well. She skillfully exposes the hypocrite society and introduces the readers with the gruesome and offensive treatment done to woman.

KEYWORDS: Gender-Discrimination, Inequality, Oppression, Secondary Position of the Woman

INTRODUCTION

“Certainly woman like man is a human being; but such an assertion is abstract...”¹ in contrary, reality is far removed from it. Equality of both the sexes, i.e. the male and the female, still seems to be a far off dream. As ‘a man is considered to be right by virtue of being man, it is the woman who is supposed to be in the wrong’. Till date, “Humanity is male, and man defines woman, not in herself, but in relation to himself; she is not considered an autonomous being” (*The Second Sex*, p. 5-6) but as the “other” through which man seeks himself. Although, over the years, efforts have been made by various socialist, philosophers and reformers to empower woman socially, economically and politically, but her position has not changed much, and due to lack of cooperation the outcomes are not yet satisfactory.

Therefore, a number of women writers across the globe are voicing the plight of woman. Especially, today is the generation of those women writers who have money and are mostly western educated. As evident from the springing of South Asian diasporic women writers, each has a mark of individuality, of its own. They grapple with complex issues such as sensuality, servility, subjugation and society. They are being recognized for their originality, versatility and the indigenous cultural flavor that they bring to their work. Their novels consist of latest burning issues related with women and those issues that exist in society since long.

These women writers have undoubtedly given an edge to the literary world with their sensitive portrayal and description, as well as, exploration of the world and psyche of woman with stunning frankness. They explore the feminine subjectivity and apply the themes that range from childhood to complete womanhood. Moreover, their women protagonists appear as real flesh and blood, which can make one look at them with awe with their relationships to their surroundings, their society, their men, their families, their mental strength and themselves. These writers have a sense of balance and regard for tradition and zeal to discover the future. They possess wisdom and agreement to change the typical mindset of people regarding gender issues. And majority of their novels depict the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewife.

Likely, Shauna Singh is also one such worthy and sensitive writer who showcases the perspective of woman undergoing suffering. Born in 1962 at Montreal, she is an internationally acclaimed Indian diasporic novelist. She has authored two novels, *What the Body Remembers* (1999) and *The Tiger Claw* (2004). She also has to her credit two short-story collections, *English Lessons and Other Stories* (1996) and *We are not in Pakistan* (2007). Though best known for her prose, she publishes in other genres as well. Her poetry and essays have been published in journals of repute throughout North America and India. Baldwin depicts a sensitive portrayal of the condition of women in the Indian sub-continent, dramatizing the plight of Indian woman with great sympathy and love. She passionately records the longings, losses and compromises of her female characters, their simple lives and the inherent consequences they face strangled between cultures, religions and ideologies.

What the Body Remembers is a powerful representation of the patriarchal society governed by its dual value system. The characters, here, represent the society where females are kept at the periphery and life revolves around the male. The prologue itself is very suggestive:

I am not a boy. Against all odds, against every pandit's
promise, despite a whole life of worship and expiation, I
have slid down the snake's tail and for all the money and
temple offerings I lavished on pundits the last time round,
here I am again...born a woman.

All I have in the life I live now is my kismet: my wits and
my will conjoined with my stars.

(*What the Body Remembers*, Prologue. p. 1)

It is a narrative saga of the fate of woman in that sickening society where boy is associated with pride and felicity and deemed to be a great boon, while the girl is treated as a lifelong burden. Moreover, "when married and the children are not forth coming, it is considered a woman's fault and she may be divorced or the man may contract polygamy."³ In the novel, Sardar Kushal Singh betrays his barren first wife Satya by secretly taking a 16 year old girl, Roop, as his second wife, just in hope to bear children. As *Tota mulier*, says, *in utero*: 'woman is a womb'. (*The Second Sex*, p. 3) When this truth gets disclosed Satya becomes "still with grieving".

A "Man thinks himself without woman. Woman does not think herself without man." And she is nothing other than what man decides; she is thus called 'the sex', meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute. She determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other." (*The Second Sex*,

p. 6) Later on, Satya decides to visit her husband, there “she threatened and raged and wheeled for hours.” The fear of an insecure life, without husband, makes her question him:

“I still have life to give, why do you throw me away?”

Sardarji roared, “I do not throw you away, I tell you! You will have all izzat, all respect; you will be looked after.”

“You will throw me away- I know it. If not now, then later.”

Satya, you should know me better.”

“Please, let’s not pretend we know each other any more. Yes,

I know you, know you better than you know yourself.”

“I know you very well, too- you have a tongue sharper than Kakeyi’s. I tell you, I’m so tired of your shouting.”

Tired of my shouting? You don’t want me because I tell you what you have become. I tell you what I see inside you, that’s why you throw me away.”

Sardar Kushal Singh raised his voice. “Collect your wits, Satya! You have brought this upon yourself with your quarelling.”

Then Satya screamed so loud the dijinns might hear.

“Aaaaaaaeeeeeeeeeeeeiiiiiiii!!!”

(*What the Body Remembers*, p. 17-18)

In the entire episode, Sardarji acts in a very insensitive manner. He is not at all ashamed or sorry for his deed. Infact, he states very casually: “But jo hoya, so hoya- what is done is done.” (*What the Body Remembers*, p. 18)

On the other hand, the novel also presents the picture of a deceptive society where “People talk of child sexual abuse or defilement but the same people will marry their daughter to an old man and this is not considered as defilement. Thus the cultural perceptions of gender are so much enshrined in our life’s culture that it is hard to change. For example the way a boy is brought up in the family is different from the way a girl is brought up. Right from the time the boys are growing up, they have to be assigned tough duties so that they become resilient, strong and brave for several reasons.”⁴ While talking about Roop’s childhood, the novelist provides descriptions of several incidents of the kind that highlight the inequality, practiced in the society towards girls. In the novel norms are different, for the two sisters, Roop and Madani, and for their brother Jeevan:

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-bhurji is for Jeevan.”

Roop moves her hand 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, very risky. Already she has too much Mangal in her

stars; makes her quarrelsome. Roop you have the

daal...Roop is old enough, she understands- she doesn’t need

the egg-bhurji; he does. He’s going to join the army.

(What the Body Remembers, p. 27)

When their mother died Roop is stopped by her Papaji, for accompanying her Mama’s body to the cremation ground with him and Jeevan, which creates more confusion in her mind. In a serious tone he says, “Go back. Go home”... “This is men’s work not for you.” (*What the Body Remembers, p. 46*) He simply overlooks her wishes.

Shauna Singh mocks at the Indian mentality to give due importance to sons. The significance imparted to son results in negligence and humiliation towards girl child. She develops the feeling that her status in the family is negligible. Furthermore, girls are encouraged to develop their feminine characteristics. As Simone de Beavoir says, in *The Second Sex* that woman is exhorted to ‘Be woman, stay woman, become woman.’ (p. 3) Therefore, Roop is threatened from the very beginning by women’s of her house to be responsible “If you’re not careful, everyone will say: ‘Let her be alone.’” (*What the Body Remembers, p. 124*) Even when men go out to marry, there are certain cultural expectations of the women they will marry. So,

Roop passed the tenth standard by applying herself at the end

of the school year just before the examinations, filling her

waking memory rapidly, emptying it to the page then

forgetting- why remember things she will never need to do

what a woman is for? A too-smart woman can be left

unmarried and remain without children for her old age.

(What the Body Remembers, p. 132)

...she is trying to be good-good, sweet-sweet and obedient

as Sita so everyone will love her just the way they loved

Mama, but she doesn’t really want to be like her mama and

never see anything beyond Pari Darwaza.

(What the Body Remembers, p. 135)

Roop kept the secret of her bad ear concealed from everyone as she gave "bachan" to her Papaji, she feared that "She might become like Madani, in whom service and loyalty must take the place of beauty, a woman of average kismet and no power to change it." (*What the Body Remembers*, p. 75)

However, Shauna Singh is not a strident who sees male as the cause of all trouble. The fault also lies with the woman who submits to the male's sense of superiority. To some extent women are themselves responsible for their victimization. And the worse fact is that alike men, women are also involved in propagating false ideals of patriarchy from generation to generation.

By now, Bachan Singh, Gujri, Revati and Kusum have done their
duty well: Roop has learned shame.

Roop has come to dread what-people-will-say.

(*What the Body Remembers*, p. 135)

After her marriage Roop is advised by Mani Mai to decorate herself always with jewels and ornaments. "That" she said, "is the surest way for you to carve your place of respect in Sardarji's life, and for people to know how much he respects you. And," Mani Mai adds, "there's no need for the Bari-Sardarni to know what he gives you." (*What the Body Remembers*, p. 283) This too clarifies the truth, that, for her Man she is a kind of commodity, an amusement, a pleasure company, an inessential boon; though he is for her the meaning, the justification of her existence. It is mainly the "Biological need-sexual desire and desire for posterity- which makes the male dependent on the female, has not liberated women socially." (*The Second Sex*, p. 9)

Roop makes continuous efforts to please her husband, she becomes careful to learn slowly just to feed his male ego "she makes her rehearsed mistakes so prettily, continually reassuring him" posing to be innocent and hide her actual learning. Again her inner fear combined with Miss Barlow's "warning of the danger of aspiring to more knowledge than a husband needs in a wife" (*What the Body Remembers*, p. 429) periled her to act in this manner. For his sake and happiness she submits to the role of the 'other', but to her disaster all attempts go in vain. She even gives away her first child Pavan, a daughter, and her second baby Timcu, a son, to Satya, despite of her unwillingness and pain, only to maintain her place and get showered with love and favor of her husband lifelong. Now, Satya, too begins the retort to desperate measures to maintain her position in society and her husband's heart. Both the women love their husband to the point of extent, being unaware of his hypocrisy and cunningness:

Satya was Sardarji's tool, the instrument by which he
tortured Roop, then stood back complaining how his women
fought like cats, never giving him any peace. But so too was
Roop the instrument by which he tortured Satya.

(*What the Body Remembers*, p. 422)

Sardar Kushal Singh and Bachan Singh are the proud representatives of society where women are not considered as an individual, but as subservient to men and the end of their life is to provide comfort to their husband and in-laws. When Roop returns to her Papaji's house, her father refuses to protect her in spite of knowing that her life was in danger. She then understands that "His duty to Roop ended the day of her marriage, but his duty to Jeevan lasts to the day his body follows Mama's to cremation and beyond. Jeevan's inheritance is far, far more important to Papaji than Roop's life or

children.” (*What the Body Remembers*, p. 343) Bachan Singh spares none in the name of family honour, he does not even hesitate to cut off the head of her daughter-in-law Kusum with a sword. Revati, his sister, is another silent victim. Furthermore, Roop is never free to take decisions of her life, yet, she is blamed for all the disastrous events that took place in her life. Her helplessness is revealed in her questions:

*How can my own Papaji have any doubt that I have been
wronged? Any question that I was in danger? I have given
him trouble by coming home, but can he not see I was so
afraid I came without my children? Can Papaji not see, see
even from the corner of his eye that I was pressed beyond
endurance*

(*What the Body Remembers*, p. 342)

Finally, with Satya’s unfortunate death, Roop turns mature and finds her pain and suffering quite less in comparison to Satya’s. A realization comes to her, “If I had been born a few years, earlier, I could have been Satya”. (*What the Body Remembers*, p. 424) Surprisingly, she feels a strong bond with Satya, who when alive appeared as rival to her:

*“We are true sisters, now. I felt your smoldering anger that
one long moment. Believe me, I felt the wound of your
humiliation pass through my flesh, past bone, past breath.
Bhainji, I told you, woman within woman. Like, the Gurus,
we might be one spirit, different bodies. Satya, I felt all that
one long moment and it simmers within me, waiting some
day to boil.”*

(*What the Body Remembers*, p. 472)

CONCLUSIONS

Almost all the female characters in the novel are victims of the values of patriarchal society in one or the other way. The story of exploitation of woman is more or less same everywhere. Only the degree of anguish varies, “Gujri says her whole village thought her unlucky after her husband died, even though she’d never seen him, never, ever, and in those days her elders advised she should not marry again lest she kill another husband.” (*What the Body Remembers*, p. 28) Roop’s Mama died due to lack of proper medical attention.

Revati’s condition is that of a worker, at her brother’s house, without any financial commitment. Huma, Roop’s childhood friend, endures humiliation and restrictions of liberty till the end of her life. Kusum is one of the worst sufferers, she has to pay her life for false ideologies and value system. Likely, Satya and Roop are no exception.

The novel, *What the Body Remembers* establishes that a female is in no way inferior to a male and it is the duty of parents to inculcate strength of character and imbibe values in their daughters. Moreover, the society should enable the woman to think for herself and to take self-decisions, which will certainly bring positive changes in their lives. Equal

treatment in the family and society is the only key to uplift the status of woman that will lead her to fulfillment. Even though her condition is changing, woman is heavily handicapped. It is high time now to get alarmed, the need is to act in proper direction. Woman’s cry must not be ignored anymore, as she has suffered a lot:

I have come so far; I have borne so much pain and
emptiness!

But men have not changed.

(*What the Body Remembers*, Epilogue. p. 608)

REFERENCES

1. Beavoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. London: Vintage Books, 2011. p. 4. Trans.
2. Baldwin, Shauna Singh. *What the Body Remembers*. Canada: Knopf, 1999. Prologue. p. 1.
3. Mumbi, Patrick. “From Fixity to Flow: Empowering Theories in Gender Studies”. 8 November, 2011. p. 4. www.fenza.org/docs/mum/mumbi_from_fixity_to_flow.pdf.
4. *ibid.* p. 2-3.

