

29.

Feminism in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*

G. Dhivya, Research Scholar, Prist Deemed University, Vallam, Thanjavur

Dr. K. Shibila, Research Supervisor, Prist Deemed University, Vallam, Thanjavur

Abstract: Feminism focuses on eradicating gender inequality and promoting women's rights, in society. Shauna Singh Baldwin mesmerizes with her fictional female characters in *What the Body Remembers*. She portrays the trauma of women at the time of partition in India. The experiences of Satya and Roop in *What the Body Remembers* show the pattern of life that has been followed for centuries. Their purpose in life is to marry and bear children. They spend their lives dependant. Patriarchal mind set towards women needs to be uprooted from society in order to bring liberty, equality and fraternity among the women. The women of today need to reach a new stage that when a woman moves forward, the family moves, society moves and the nation moves. This will enable them to become equal social partner of men.

The following is the abbreviation used after the quotation:

WBR – *What the Body Remembers*

The word "feminism" was coined by Charles Fourier. Feminism is a political activism commonly campaign on the issues like reproductive rights, violence within a domestic partnership, maternity leave, equal pay, sexual harassment and gender discrimination. Themes explored in feminism include patriarchy, stereotyping, objectification, oppression. The theme feminism is used by many writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, Alice Walker, Margaret Atwood, Sylvia Plath, Doris Lessing, and Julia Kristeva. Shauna Singh Baldwin has also used the theme of feminism in her novels like *What the Body Remembers*, *The Selector of the Soul*, *The Tiger Claw*. In the novel, *What the Body Remembers*, she explores more on feminism with the help of two female characters named as Roop and Satya. It focuses on the subjugation of women at the time of partition. Sardarji is a patriarchal conqueror who divides and rules Satya and Roop. It symbolizes him as an imperial conqueror who divides and rules Hindu, Muslim and Sikh during the time of Partition of India.

In *What the Body Remembers*, Baldwin is interested in depicting themes of colonialism, race, ethnicity, and gender related themes. The most touching and pathetic female character is Roop, one of Bachan Singh's three children, is born in the Punjabi village of Pari Darvaza around 1921. Her father is the leader of the Sikh community in her village. The village is also home to Hindus and Muslims. These groups live together and socialize with few problems. While Roop receives some education and religious training, her father's efforts are concentrated on her brother, who eventually becomes an army officer.

As a young girl, Roop has a variety of adventures and misadventures. By the time Roop has reached marriageable age, she has been moulded into the ideal Sikh woman. By the age of sixteen, she has learned to be a "good-good, sweet-sweet girl" (WBR 176), always listening and obeying.

A marriage proposal is brought for Roop from the most influential person in the rural community, Sardar Kushal Singh. Sardarji is much older than Roop and already married. But his wife is childless, so Sardarji seeks marriage to a younger woman in order to give himself a male heir. After the wedding, Roop is taken to live in Rawalpindi with Sardarji and his first wife, Satya. Satya is very supportive of her husband, taking an active role in running his household and some of his business affairs. Satya resents Roop's presence in her life and verbally taunts and abuses her.

After Roop gives birth to Sardarji's first child, there is great disappointment, "Despite the whole canal colony's fervent expectations, hopes, blessings, and prayers, despite all Mani Mai's prayers to her Allah, her charms and amulets, the womb-world has prepared and sent Roop a girl who took twenty hours to be born, so reluctant was she to take birth again . . ." (177). Her husband's words of comfort are indicative of the overall attitude toward women, "Don't worry . . . the next one will be a boy" (183).

The experiences of other women throughout the novel also follow this pattern. Gujri, Roop's family's servant, comes with Roop as a marriage present, "like Mama's dowry pots and pans" (21). Gujri has no option in the substance. At the age of seven, her father has given her away as a slave. Later she marries and becomes a widow. The whole village considers her unsuccessful and says that she can in no way get married again "lest she kill another husband" (23). As a result, Gujri is reduced to a permanent domestic slave. Kusum, Roop's sister-in-law faces a heartbreaking end. When the mob violence by the Muslim majority on the eve of Partition threatens to overrun Bachan Singh's home, he kills Kusum himself, "I cannot endure even the possibility that some Muslim might put his hands upon her . . . I must do my duty" (455).

Roop ruminates larger than her father's achievement, "Papaji thinks that for good-good women, death ought to be preferable to bring shame on" (456). This shows that a woman's value in this society is tied to her worth as a wife and mother. Her honor depends whether she is a pure woman. Her life, without value is not worth living.

When Roop comes to live in Sardarji's household, Satya finds out about their marriage and has the following dream, "Sardarji is beside me again, his snoring lending rhythm to the moonlight silvering the courtyard. Roop lies between us, her body pale and hairless, limbs supple and careless. And from between Roop's legs there sprout apricot buds ready to open into flowers. And Sardarji plucks these, one by one, and gives them to me." (36)

This dream is an insight into Satya's feelings about Roop's appearance in her life. Roop lies between them. She feels the loneliness and disruption when Sardarji's new wife comes in her life. The reason for Roop's introduction into their life is clearly represented by the budding apricot, "ready to open into flowers", a sign of Roop's fertility. Satya's desire to take Roop's children as her own, is symbolized when Sardarji "plucks these (the buds), one by one, and gives them to me." (120). Satya's infertility appears in several images, "The canal feeds the desert till it turns green, and now small wanderers stop at their banks and they stay" (244-245). The barren becoming fertile and the small wanderers are representative of Satya's desire to have children of her own. A bit later she dreams of moving southward, with "My hollow breasts swinging before me" (134). This image also ties in with the idea of fertility. The final image of her dream foreshadows the events to come after Partition.

Just before the Partition, Roop has a dream in which she carries a cut-glass bowl filled with a crimson liquid. This dream suggests the coming violence and underscores the religious and social causes behind it. Roop carries the bowl, “carefully, so carefully; not a drop must spill” (54). This symbolizes the underlying social tension in Punjab. Her status as a woman also appears in the dream.

Roop’s identity is dependent on her relationships with the men in her life. In the dream, she encounters a woman with a sword. Fearful, Roop imagines that it might be Satya, angry at her in death as she was in life. This turns out not to be the case, “Miss Barlow advances toward me, raises the sword high above her head. The sickle moon, the woman’s sword, shines as one. The sword falls. Crystal shatters to fragments . . . There is red, everywhere crimson red.” (200). The image of her English tutor, smashing the bowl with the sword is symbolic of the role the British have played in the partition of Punjab.

Roop experiences emotional pain when she marries Sardarji and is forced to leave her home and family. Ripped from the proverbial womb, when she arrives at her husband's home, she is told that time will heal her. Years later, Roop realizes what these words actually mean, “When women like Toshi say time will heal, they mean that time will heal not so the wound bleeds any less, but so the bleeding becomes my habitual companion and only if it stops one day will I notice its absence.” (213)

The experiences of Satya and Roop show the pattern of life that has been followed for centuries. Their purpose in life is to marry and bear children. They spend their lives dependant on fathers or husbands for financial support. This is noticeable in Roop's life. Patriarchal mind set towards women needs to be uprooted from society in order to bring liberty, equality and fraternity among the women. The women of today need to reach a new stage that when a woman moves forward, the family moves, society moves and the nation moves. This will enable them to become equal social partner of men.

Works Cited

Baldwin, Shauna Singh. *What the Body Remembers*. New Delhi: Knopf Canada, 1999. Print.

Bibliography

Kudchedkar, Shirin. *Postmodernism and Feminism*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2005. Print.

Prasad, Amarnath. *Feminism in Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2006. Print.

