

The Rebirth of Inherited Memories

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*Women were arguably the worst victims of the Partition of India in 1947 and endured displacement, violence, abduction, prostitution, mutilation, and rape. However, on reading histories of the division of India, one finds that the life-stories of women are often elided, and that there is an unwillingness to address the atrocities of 1947. This reticence results partly from the desires of the Indian and Pakistani governments to portray the events as freak occurrences with no place in their modern nations. Literature can play an important role in interrupting state-managed histories, and 'The Rebirth of Inherited Memories' focuses upon the manner in which Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (2001) unsettles official versions of Partition. It examines how the novel acts as a counterpoint to 'national' accounts of 1947 through its depiction of the gendered nature of much of the violence, and it explores Baldwin's representation of the elusive concept of 'body memory'. The possibility of remembrances being passed on physically, or born within people, has found support in the eschatologies of Eastern religions, in Western psychological theories, and in recent scientific investigations into the 'mind-body' problem. The transmission of 'body memories' between generations serves to disrupt accounts that downplay the brutalities at the splitting of India. This paper draws upon a chapter of my doctoral thesis that investigates issues of memory and the enduring influence of Partition in South Asia.*

What the Body Remembers (2001), by Shauna Singh Baldwin, delineates the battle between two Sikh women, Satya and Roop, for the affections of their shared husband. Sardarji marries Roop, his second wife, due to Satya's inability to produce children. The disputes between the two women take place against the backdrop of the division of India, but rather than allowing their fighting to become emblematic of the conflict between Hindus/Sikhs and Muslims, Baldwin employs Satya and Roop to illuminate the social standing of women in 1947. At Partition women became sites of contestation for the men of different religious communities and women's bodies bore the brunt of violence and sexual assaults. However, the physical markings and memories carried by thousands of women allow them to fulfil a more subversive role. The attacks, maiming, and bodily inscriptions act as counter-narratives that ensure such atrocities are not edited out of the stories that India and Pakistan create of their pasts. In *What the Body Remembers*, Baldwin undermines revisionist histories that underplay the horrors of 1947, and depicts how horrific memories can be as much embodied as, as it were, embrained. She achieves this in her representation of the physical suffering of her female characters and of the transference of recollections between generations.

The gendered nature of the violence at Partition is evident in ‘Delhi, September 1947’, the final subsection of the last chapter of the novel. Its compressed nature allows a rapid reenactment of an appalling event, and it is revealed partially as an eye-witness account as Jeevan (Roop’s brother) describes his discovery of the mutilated body of his wife (Kusum). This excentric perspective breaks up the linear narration of the main story, and draws attention to women’s suffering post-Independence: ‘[a] woman’s body lay beneath, each limb severed at the joint. This body was sliced into six parts, then arranged to look as if she were whole again’.¹ The ‘partitioning’ of Kusum is symptomatic of the vicious nature of attacks, but Jeevan, who as a soldier is accustomed to brutality, is unsettled as his wife has *not* been the victim of sexual assault: ‘[t]o cut a woman apart without first raping – a waste, surely’ (*WBR* p. 511). Jeevan is aware of the prevalence of rape as a weapon to emasculate men of a different religious community. However, a closer examination of Kusum’s body uncovers the full extent of the barbarism of the Muslim gang that has removed her womb to symbolize their desire to eliminate all Sikhs, in the present and in the future.

As Roop attempts to rebuild her life with her family in Delhi after Independence, she begins to share her brother’s misgivings about the death of her sister-in-law, and she realizes that the full story has yet to be told. She cannot understand why it was *only* Kusum who was killed while the rest of her family escaped. Roop’s worst fears are proved right when, at last, her father unburdens himself to her, revealing that he beheaded his daughter-in-law as the fighting escalated: ‘[e]very day I had been hearing that the seeds of that foreign religion were being planted in Sikh women’s wombs. No, I said: I must do my duty’ (p. 520). He delineates how he explained what ‘had’ to be done to Kusum, and how she concurred, allegedly, with his plan. However, his martyring of Kusum is presented as being more about *his* wishes than about the aspirations of his daughter-in-law. Baldwin depicts Roop as unprepared to accept the execution as a necessary sacrifice. She wants Kusum to be remembered in her own right, not as a victim of her father’s unstinting belief in the need to maintain female sexual purity and family honour. Throughout her father’s narration of the last moments of Kusum’s life, Baldwin employs Roop’s thoughts to interrupt the fable that her father wants to enshrine, and her cynicism is apparent when he declares how the gods helped him to decapitate Kusum cleanly with a single blow: ‘[o]ne stroke? Just one stroke’ (p. 521). Roop will not credit the idea that her sister-in-law’s meek acceptance of her fate can *only* be ascribed to her virtuousness, and views Kusum’s inability to protest as stemming from her inculcation with

¹ Shauna Singh Baldwin, *What the Body Remembers* (London: Black Swan, 2001), p. 510. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *WBR*.

the norms of Sikh society. Through Roop's enquiries, Baldwin reinscribes a fuller account of what happened to many women in 1947, and Roop's investigation prevents her sister-in-law from becoming an anonymous victim. Baldwin is keen to ensure that women's experiences are remembered and is fascinated by the ways in which memories are passed from generation to generation.

One of the most interesting aspects of *What the Body Remembers* is its revelation of the transmission of the past through non-verbal or non-textual means. Theorists such as Dominick LaCapra have discussed the difficulties in finding means to express adequately 'limit-events' such as the Holocaust or, in this case, Partition.² Problems include the gap between the possibilities of language and the actualities of events, the 'transference' of writers' personal feelings of anger or hatred, and the danger of trivialization through the selection of material and its editing. Baldwin explores the idea that, given these complexities, there may be alternative bodily methods of witnessing history's worst atrocities. The concept of 'body memories' is found, for example, in the eschatology of Sikhism, in psychological ideas such as Carl Jung's 'archetypes', or Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's 'transgenerational phantoms', and in the rejection of Cartesian dualism by scientists such as Antonio Damasio.³ A closer examination of religious, psychological, and scientific theory suggests a degree of agreement or overlap concerning such physical recollections. Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism all involve a belief in reincarnation. The soul (*atma*) is viewed as immortal and persists once the body dies. The future destination of a person's soul is determined by the ethics of her past actions (her *karma*):

The Indian sages conceived of life, within both the micro- and macro-cosmic spheres, not as a steady state but as a process, a continual and protracted (if not interminable) flow of life-powers, a perpetual fluctuation of forces or a coursing of energies through channels that pervade the body of the universe and the bodies of all the creatures who inhabit it.⁴

² See, for example, Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998).

³ C.G. Jung, 'On the Psychology of the Unconscious', in *The Essential Jung*, ed. by Anthony Storr (London: Fontana, 1998), pp. 68-71; Nicolas Abraham, 'Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology' (1975), in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, ed. and trans. by Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), I, pp. 171-76; Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (London: Penguin, 1994).

Virtues, talents, and powers can be transferred, not only from a person's current existence to a future life, but also between family members. This idea of merit transfer leads to the possibility of *karma* flowing between relatives, living and dead. A person's actions create 'karmic residues' (*karmasaya*) that are either meritorious (*dharma*) or unmeritorious (*adharmā*) depending on their behaviour. These residues are accompanied by 'dispositional tendencies' (*samskara*) that can, when activated, recreate memories of the acts that produced the residue. They can be triggered within the originator's lifetime, but may not be reanimated until a future existence.

It is not difficult to see how links can be drawn between the eschatologies of Eastern religions and modern Western psychotherapy and philosophy of science. Jung's delineation of 'collective consciousness', 'ancestral heritage', and 'archetypes' reveals the influence upon his work of religious concepts such as *karma*, *karmasaya*, and *samskara*.⁵ This is something which he admits readily, and his description of archetypes as those dreams, visions, and delusions that influence our instinctual behaviour, forges closer connections with ideas embedded within Eastern philosophical traditions. Jung's portrayal of archetypes is reminiscent of the concept of *karmasaya*, and their power and influence can be related to the reactivation of *samskara*. Similarly, in the field of neuroscience Damasio expounds his belief that our minds are embodied, with mind and body ultimately inseparable:

In human societies there are social conventions and ethical rules over and above those that biology already provides [...]. Although such conventions and rules need be transmitted only through education and socialization, from generation to generation, I suspect that the neural representations of the wisdom they embody, and of the means to implement that wisdom are inextricably linked to the neural representation of innate regulatory biological processes.⁶

Damasio recognizes the importance of socialization in transmitting automated alarm signals that affect the decisions that we make when avoiding pain or discomfort. Nevertheless, the fact that our mental processes so often coexist with bodily sensations, or what Damasio terms

⁴ J. Bruce Long, 'The Concepts of Human Action and Rebirth in the *Mahabharata*', in *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions*, ed. by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), pp. 38-60 (p. 57).

⁵ C.G. Jung, 'Psychological Commentary on "The Tibetan Book of the Dead"', in *The Collected Works*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, ed. by Herbert Read and others, 20 vols. (London: Routledge, 1977), XI, pp. 509-26.

⁶ Damasio, pp. 124-25.

‘somatic markers’, suggests that our ‘innate regulatory dispositions’ are biological as well as psychological.⁷

The importance of the concept of ‘body memory’ is more apparent when its role with regard to trauma is evaluated. Marianne Hirsch employs the term ‘postmemory’ to explore how knowledge of the past can be passed on to descendants of victims of ‘limit-events’, and how brutalities may be relived vicariously: ‘[p]ostmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that precede their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right’.⁸ Hirsch views family as a privileged site of memory transmission, and selects Art Spiegelman’s cartoon depiction of his family’s experiences of the Holocaust, *Maus* (1980-1991), to consider how texts, fictional or non-fictional, can represent the effects on children of living with parents whose past traumas cause long-term mental suffering. Spiegelman’s trope of constructing a narrative that involves his reconstruction of his relatives’ lives under the Nazis is mirrored by the detective work undertaken by Roop in *What the Body Remembers*. Such investigations are fundamental to the creation of countervailing accounts of significant world events, and ‘draw attention to the failure of professional historians to uncover these particular hidden crimes’.⁹ Examinations of historical presentations of Partition reveal how, often for nationalistic or ideological reasons, biographies of the Indian and Pakistani nations have understated the violence surrounding Independence. The preservation and sharing of inherited memories serves, therefore, to counter simplistic linear plotlines that offer a seamless transition from the protests of the Indian nationalist movement to the establishment of two separate self-governing nations.

In *What the Body Remembers*, the death of Kusum leads to Roop’s attempts to form an accurate picture of her sister-in-law’s brutal demise. Roop believes it is her duty to ensure that this element of her family’s history is not forgotten. As Roop uncovers the truth, Baldwin describes her as becoming a living embodiment of Kusum’s memory: ‘Jeevan continues and his story enters Roop’s body. This telling is not for Roop, this telling is for Roop to tell his sons, and her sons’ (*WBR* p. 509). While Jeevan recounts his tale, Kusum’s traumatic death sediments itself into Roop’s memory, to be retold and relived in the future. As Baldwin presents the months before and after the splitting of India, Roop becomes a conduit also for the knowledge and experience of Satya, her co-wife. This is more surprising as, during the six

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁸ Marianne Hirsch, ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, in *Poetics Today*, 29.1 (2008), 103-28 (p. 103).

⁹ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 285.

years that they share a husband, Satya tries to vanquish Roop through a combination of humiliation, intimidation, and violence. Given the conflict between the two wives, Roop seems an unlikely resting place for Satya's soul, when the first wife dies of tuberculosis. Roop is forced to visit Satya on her deathbed, and it is as Satya expires that Baldwin imagines the karmic transfer between the two women: '[b]ut because Roop felt that one, single moment, that single solitary empathetic moment, Satya will live on in Roop [...] Roop will be Satya's vessel, bearing Satya's anger, pride and ambition forward from this minute. Like the Gurus, they might be one spirit, different bodies' (p. 378). The revelation of Satya's 'possession' of Roop allows connections to be drawn with the religious and psychological theories discussed previously. Baldwin alludes to the transmission of 'karmic residues' as Satya's energies are reincarnated within Roop. Furthermore, Jung's formulation of 'archetypes' as 'deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity' is equally applicable as Roop inherits Satya's wisdom.¹⁰

Despite Roop's reluctance to empathize with Satya, her former tormentor's spirit acts hereafter like a guardian angel, guiding and empowering her at critical junctures. The benign nature of Satya's karma becomes apparent: '[a]nd Roop – I have amends to make to Roop, for my anger and actions, for the way I used her . . .' (*WBR* p. 404). Satya's soul is determined to put right its unmeritorious actions in its previous incarnation by ensuring that such errors are not repeated, as it paraphrases George Santayana's well-known argument that '*if you do not learn what you are meant to learn from your past lives, you are condemned to repeat them*' (p. 404). Towards the close of *What the Body Remembers*, as the full horror of the violence at Partition unfolds, Satya reappears to affect Roop's behaviour at pivotal moments. When Roop is forced to lie about her religious background as she escapes from Pakistan to Delhi, it seems to be the spirit of Satya that compels her to action:

Comes a thought from the fringe of awareness as if some other woman spoke from the wings, shaped the thoughts that speed across the theatre of Roop's mind: *Surrender is not the only option.*

And then another.

Some men are not entitled to the truth. (p. 484)

¹⁰ C.G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, 2nd ed. (1966; repr. London: Routledge, 1990), p. 69.

The pride and defiance that characterized Satya's personality give Roop the strength to challenge Pakistani soldiers and to defend her children. While, at times, Satya's impact is presented as operating at an unconscious level, setting off alarm signals within Roop, there are also occasions when Roop is fully aware of Satya's influence and she looks to her former enemy as a role model. As Roop waits in Delhi for the arrival of her husband by rail, and witnesses the slaughter of train-loads of Hindus and Sikhs, she is inspired by the confidence of her erstwhile rival:

Afterwards, when the stench overtakes the crying and moaning, Roop models her voice on Satya's to ask questions the way Satya would have asked them. 'Where did this train start from?' 'Where did it stop on its way?' with that peremptory edge that says she has a right to their answers because of her high birth. (p. 496)

The concept of 'body memories', and the importance of learning from history, is at the heart of Baldwin's novel. Her representation of the transfer of recollections between women from different generations underlines her interest in how the division of India is remembered and, in particular, how women's experiences are reimagined. Passing on memories within families or social groups, either through storytelling or via more elusive mind-body connections, acts to ensure that traumatic events are not glossed over in the histories of communities or nations. Within *What the Body Remembers*, Baldwin's delineation of Roop's sense of responsibility regarding the transmission of an accurate account of Kusum's death, and of the manner in which Satya is reborn within Roop, emphasizes the agency of women in preserving their biographies within communal memory.

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