Chapter 8

Woman’s Body as the Hegemonic Construct of Patriarchy in Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *What the Body Remembers*

Indian born Canadian-American novelist Shauna Singh Baldwin is a former radio producer and ecocommerce consultant. Her fiction and poems are widely published in both Canada and India. Baldwin holds that she began writing fiction to make sense of the world by describing it (“In Different Voices”). In her works she offers a “nuanced analysis of the hierarchies of class, ethnicity and gender” (Voices from Beyond the Pale”). Baldwin’s first novel *What the Body remembers* received the 2000 Commonwealth Writer’s Prize for Best Book in Canada Carribean region. Critics view the novel as the product of Baldwin’s “passion for re-membering her dismembered homeland and her desire to tell women’s versions” (Jackson). The novel illuminates how social expectations damage a woman’s existence. These expectations are primarily the consequence of the ‘ultra-feminine’ role model that has been constructed and established through the regulative social norms. Here woman’s body becomes a hegemonic construction and, consequently, the source of her victimization. Baldwin focusses primarily on describing the journey of Roop, a young girl from pre-independence Punjab. Her family marries her to a rich, childless, already-married elderly man for the purpose of providing him with a male heir. Roop comes across several women who are also targets of unfair social codes; the chief example being Satya, the first wife of Roop’s husband. Satya tries every possible trick to wreak havoc in the naïve
young woman’s life. Her shrewd and cunning demeanour hides a heart weighed down by fear of disappointing those around her. In fact, the narrative abounds in descriptions of violence experienced by women like Roop, her mother, her aunt Revathi, her sister-in-law Kusum, her maid Gujri, Satya, which show how women are trapped in a biologically defined existence, and are victims of female body politics. Analysis of the novel reveals how female sexual body becomes a site of control and violence by means of cultural ideologies.

Baldwin’s narration moves largely between Roop’s account of her childhood experiences and her marital life which is described alternately through the perspective of Roop and Satya. Roop is introduced as a seven year-old girl with immense confidence fuelled by the knowledge that she is blessed with exceptional beauty and belongs to a wealthy family, the requisites for every girl who wants to have a relatively better future. But Roop is aware of the pitfalls of growing up as a girl, for she is constantly made to feel that she lacks something essential vis-à-vis her brother. She is prevented from taking meat and eggs because these are supposed to be for male consumption. Also, the elderly women of her household believe that a non-vegetarian diet generally makes a woman, like Roop, born on a Tuesday quarrelsome and disobedient. Roop is an athletic child. She is close to her brother Jeevan and indulges in horse-playing with him. Jeevan is indulgent enough to allow her to playfully take part in ‘men’s sport’ with him but expresses displeasure when she naively performs better than an average girl. Roop is continuously reminded that a smart woman is often unable to enjoy the pleasures of normal marriage and motherhood (Baldwin 125). In fact, Roop is constantly drilled –
by her maid servant Gujri as well as her aunt Lajo – with the codes of conduct best suited to a female disposition. These include traits, such as gentility, selflessness, delicateness, amiability, modesty, compliance, proclivity towards domestic pursuits, and the ability to unflinchingly bear pain in all forms. Roop’s mother is shown to be the embodiment of all these feminine traits.

Roop’s mother is not assigned any name. She is usually referred to as ‘mama.’ Being a mother is her sole identity and the prime motive of her existence. She has three children; amongst them is a son. But her husband expects another son from her even if it would mean going through a difficult pregnancy at her age. Her husband Bachan Singh is, however, liberal enough to allow his sick wife get professional medical aid. But his mother-in-law vociferously vetoes his idea. Roop’s maternal grandmother belongs to that old school of ‘tradition’ which upholds a woman’s social respectability over her life. She refuses to allow the possibility of her daughter’s body being contaminated by the touch of male medical examiners. Bachan Singh thus has to retreat in the face of rigid ideologies wrapped up and presented in the figure of his frail mother-in-law. He does not seek his wife’s opinion on the matter, for he knows that she will always bow down to her husband’s wishes. Roop’s mother is a typical example of an individual living her life in what Sartre terms as “bad faith.” She believes that her existence – centered on her role as a mother – is contingent on God’s wishes. She knowingly lets herself be led by the other individual’s wants and desires. Roop’s mother’s passive existence ultimately becomes the cause of her death. She and her newborn son die for lack of proper medical aid. Her funeral is attended by number of women come only to mourn the death of Roop’s newborn brother. Roop’s grandmother
loudly expresses her grief in public. It shows her hypocrisy for her outright refusal to allow her daughter to receive proper medical treatment is the cause of her death. Roop’s grandmother purposely injures herself as a mark of her mourning. People find it appropriate for her to suffer as she has committed the sin of outliving her own children. They view Roop’s grandmother’s existence as meaningless for a woman is “nothing” and “no one” without her children (53).

The fate of Roop’s mother represents the patriarchal image of the ‘selfless Mother.’ Patriarchy glorifies, represents and reiterates the notion of motherhood through cultural myths, religious scriptures and even the educational system. Roop is forced by elderly women to witness her mother’s painful labour because they want her to learn that a woman has been put on this earth for the sole purpose of carrying forward the familial dynasty. Woman’s duty is to give birth to a male child even at the cost of her own life. The patriarchal indoctrination of Roop thus highlights the way woman’s body is manufactured in specific ways in a phallocentric society. In Discipline and Punish, Michel Foucault states that the human body is the “functional site” where different disciplinary institutions carve out individual segments, establish operational links, indicate values and demand obedience (149). In fact, patriarchy operates in these disciplinary sites where an individual’s activities are controlled through constant supervision. Similarly, every move made by Roop is scrutinized by women, and they discipline her in accordance with the social norms. Roop, however, always feels that she is not “giving enough” to do full justice to the label of femininity affixed to her identity; she
fears that she will be definitely punished in her next life by being reborn as a
dog, or even worse, as a girl again (Baldwin 71).

An adolescent Roop starts harbouring the fear of spinsterhood. Her
family falls on hard times. Bachan Singh loses his inheritance and money to
his half-brother and business partner. Roop also loses her hearing ability in
one ear. Bachan Singh elicits a promise from Roop that she will never disclose
her handicap. The partial loss of her hearing ability compels Roop to diligently
follow the rules laid out for girls of marriageable age. She refuses to study as
men choose only those girls who can’t converse beyond the monosyllabic
answers like ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ She refuses to read books for she is convinced that
reading is a hobby and occupation for girls lacking good marriage prospects.
She does not indulge in outdoor work or strenuous activity for it might harm
her hymen (the sign of her chastity). Roop also holds wealth and social
respectability as the prime indicators of a good marital match. In the end,
sixteen-year old Roop chooses to marry a forty-two year old married man for
he is prosperous and can afford to hire a bevy of servants. Roop unwittingly
invites a life of misery for herself. After marriage Roop’s husband, addressed
by those around him as ‘Sardarji,’ leaves his new bride into the care of his first
wife Satya. Roop eagerly accepts Satya as a benevolent older sister and
mentor. However, she gradually becomes aware of Satya’s vindictive nature.

Satya is a strong-willed woman. Despite being uneducated, Satya
attempts to be equal to her husband in almost all aspects. Satya is Sardarji’s
confidante. She looks after his personal comfort, and even helps him in
business and financial matters. But her inability to provide Sardarji with a
child leads to her public humiliation. Her failure to beget children is
repeatedly brought to Sardarji’s attention by his relations. Initially, Satya gets indignant at the taunts about her ‘imperfections’ and callous dismissal based on the biological aspects of her existence. But she eventually albeit halfheartedly agrees to search for a suitable bride for Sardarji. Yet Satya makes sure that a suitable marriage prospect never shows up; it compels Sardarji to look for a bride much to Satya’s agitation. Her protests and pleas fall on deaf ears, and Sardarji marries Roop. For Satya, sixteen year old Roop is the symbol of her failure to be an ideal spouse. She interprets Roop’s compliant attitude towards her as indifference to her pain. Satya vows to teach the “nobody” a lesson for her ignorance (193). But Satya views Sardarji’s indifference towards her needs as his being extremely busy in his business transactions. Nevertheless, she demands the right to raise any child that Roop might bear in their house. In his attempt to avoid an argument with Satya, Sardarji concedes her wish and asks Roop to accept his decision. This sacrificial act, in his view, will bring his young bride extreme joy in the future. Roop – taught by Aunt Lajo to repress the anger she might have for her husband – silently accepts Sardarji’s pronouncement.

Roop’s first-born is a girl; a fact met with indifference from Sardarji and anger by Satya. Nonetheless, the birth of a girl does not stop the older woman from taking her away from Roop. Satya wants to Roop to experience the pain she felt when Sardarji entered into his second marriage. Satya sends back Roop’s daughter Pavan after a few months but takes away the second-born, a son. She chooses the names for both children, and resorts to treating Roop as hired help. By not allowing Roop to exert any maternal rights over her children, Satya subjects her to psychological violence. Satya’s actions
highlight the manner in which women’s failure to fulfill her feminine obligations embitters her. Here a woman resorts to violence to escape the guilt and punishment of her ‘lack.’ Roop eventually flees goes back to her father’s house and, later, sends for her children. Sardarji shows no concern or remorse over Roop and their daughter’s departure. In fact, he resumes physical relations with Satya. But Roop’s audacity in taking away his son and heir angers him. Sardarji views Roop’s actions as betrayal in the face of all the material comforts he has given her. Through Sardarji’s character, Baldwin highlights the lack of conscience intrinsic to a phallic subject. Sardarji – the main source of the competition between Satya and Roop – quickly absolves himself from any wrongdoing. He curses both Satya for her interference, and Roop for her inability to express her thoughts. Bachan Singh and his Jeevan order Sardarji to choose between his two wives.

Satya’s one marital vow is that she would never act timid in front of her husband. Satya treats herself as Sardarji’s equal – a fact barely tolerated by him. Roop, on the other hand, acts timid and incompetent in front of her husband in an attempt to be a perfect foil to his “manliness” (346). Sardarji chooses Roop’s bashfulness over Satya’s self-confidence. He is pleased that his second wife does not challenge his intelligence as well as his decisions. Sardarji’s choice reiterates the patriarchal ideology which regards femininity as the only acceptable trait, and a proof of women’s normalcy. Satya is barren but never expresses any guilt or shame over the fact; she is brash and strong-willed and dares to contradict her husband; she never behaves meekly to appeal to Sardarji’s masculinity. All the aforementioned facts make Satya to
be an undesirable choice for a wife in the eyes of her husband. Hence Sardarji banishes Satya from his household.

After Sardarji’s callous and indifferent rejection, Satya deliberately kisses another woman suffering from tuberculosis. It is her attempt to force her husband to accept her. In other words, Satya turns to suicide. Albert Camus states that suicide needs to be interpreted as “acceptance [of the absurd] at its extreme” (*The Myth of Sisyphus*). In fact, both Camus and Sartre view suicide as an extreme measure taken up by an individual to escape the anguish brought upon by the Nothingness that permeates this world. However, Camus says that suicide is always the wrong course of action in the face of one’s encounter with the absurd. The only route to be taken during an absurd situation is that of revolt. Satya rebels against the situation by punishing Roop, but her rebellion is misdirected. The main perpetrator of violence against Satya is, in fact, Sardarji, for he plays upon her insecurities and failings in order to justify his unethical behaviour. Instead of holding Sardarji accountable, Satya chooses to lash out at Roop – another victim of her patriarchy. After Satya’s death, Roop understands the violence inflicted on Satya. Roop also recognizes Sardarji to be the representative of patriarchy. He is revealed as the agent of patriarchal violence who controls and manipulates his two wives. He transforms Satya and Roop into “instrument[s] of torture” and pits them against each other, for the fulfillment of his selfish needs and wants fulfilled (Baldwin 378). But Roop quickly banishes such thoughts from her mind. She believes every woman should forget her spouse’s transgressions and endure all the pain that fate has in store for her. Roop reverts to the “good-good, sweet-sweet” act she’s been trained to perform since childhood (107).
Sardarji also feels the loss of Satya’s companionship and her intelligent bantering with him. His grief over Satya’s death is based on the inconvenience caused to him. Sardarji is angered at being forced to stay with the “ornamental” and “silly” Roop, incapable of sharing his thoughts and confidences (392). The double standards of a patriarchal man are evident through the character of Sardarji.

Analysis of What the Body Remembers thus highlights the violence that erupts out of the fixed female identity established through ideology. Baldwin successfully captures and represents the women’s acceptance of violence highlighted in their attempts to fully conform themselves according to the patriarchal definitions of femininity. These definitions are instituted and legitimized as the codes signifying a completely ‘normal’ woman. A woman’s normalcy depends upon her ability to marry, please her husband, and provide him with male offspring. Unmarried women, barren wives, and widows are, however, not able to fulfill these patriarchal laws. Hence they are judged as being abnormal and are humiliated and ostracized by society. The characters of Gujri and Revathi are instances of violent patriarchal laws that hold woman culpable for the crime of not being able to elicit a marriage proposal from any man or for the untimely death of her husband.

Gujri comes to work as a maid servant in Bachan Singh’s house when Roop’s mother marries him. She is from the lower caste and class, and a victim of child-marriage. Being a child widow, Gujri is accused by the village people of being the bearer of a bad omen and shunned out of her community. Her father gifts her to Roop’s grandmother as part of her newlywed daughter’s dowry. But her own degradation does not deter Gujri from inflicting
patriarchal violence and cultural biases against others. She is the flag-bearer of patriarchal beliefs regarding ‘true’ womanhood even though she has been found wanting in all these aspects. She continually slaps and instructs her young charges Roop and Madani to show behaviour that is appropriate to a girl of marriageable age. But all of Gujri’s advice is on hearsay for she has never been given the chance to fully experience the joys of the marriage mart.

Roop’s aunt Revathi is another example of the deplorable state of an unmarried woman in patriarchy. Young Revathi is a pretty girl of good caste and suitable social standing. However, as her age advances, the clout of her family’s wealth diminishes and she ends up being alone and shuffled around the homes of unwelcoming relatives.

An analysis of What the Body Remembers thus reveals that no woman is exempt from the harsh indictments that accompany the realization of the feminine ideal. Different economic and cultural sects find common ground in the rules laid down for the women. Hence Roop’s mother passively allows herself to be confined to a purdah as a sign of her husband’s wealth is a victim of patriarchal violence. Satya is abandoned by her husband and left to die a painful death due to her barrenness. Gujri is sold by her father and thus trapped forever into doing other people’s bidding. But they are strictly instructed to ‘not’ complain because their violent existence has been ordained by God. The novel sheds light on the cultural myths that promote woman’s silent suffering as a punishment for not fulfilling God’s order as the Christian story of Adam and Eve would have its follower’s believe (383). Such arguments are, in fact, essential to patriarchy which seeks to hegemonize woman’s body. Such myths are promoted to ensure the transformation of
woman’s body into a “colony” where man can exert his control and extract his valuable offspring and heirs (383). It sheds light on the misguided notions of women who avert their gaze from violence in lieu of material security. For instance, Roop and her sister Madani’s childhood playmate named Huma is the third wife of an old and extremely rich Muslim named Rai Alam Khan who enforces *purdah* upon his young wife. He refuses her to interact with others, and treats her as a mere sexual body meant for bearing children. However, Huma accepts violence, for the jewelry she receives from her husband makes her feel content.

The novel also illuminates how woman’s body becomes a symbol of man’s self-respect, honour and social prestige. The brutal killing and dismemberment of the body of Roop’s sister-in-law Kusum signifies the way in which female body becomes a site for society’s inscription of its codes of life, death, and revenge. A Sikh woman living in the newly created nation for Muslims called Pakistan, Kusum is caught amidst the crossfire between two warring communities, and is cruelly murdered by Muslims. Her death is meant to serve as a message and a warning for Hindus and Sikhs to vacate the Muslim territory. Kusum’s body is systematically cut into six parts and put back together and her womb is ripped out, thereby signifying that Muslims now hold the power of wiping out the entire Hindu and Sikh communities from Pakistan. Kusum’s disemboweled body thus becomes an instrument symbolizing the dominant community’s power. In other words, her body post-mutilation is transformed into a communal entity. In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard states that violence is a great “leveler” of men for it transforms community members into matching images of violence (83). Here a single
victim is often substituted for all the potential victims, and each member’s hostility is converted from an individual feeling to a communal force unanimously directed against a single individual. In brief, violence becomes the unifying factor in a community driven by religious ideology. Kusum’s dismembered body shows that even in her death she is not able to assume an individualistic identity. She becomes a political tool between two fighting communities. Her brutal execution becomes a means through which the Muslims spread their politics of terror, and exert their superiority.

The fate of the women in the narrative shows that patriarchy has molded and transformed woman’s body into a structure representing control and domination. All social institutions have invented new methods to manipulate the female body to ensure that it performs the assigned functions like an automaton. They have, in fact, become punitive and correctional in design and mostly control and manipulate the body without the use of any external force. These institutions are instrumental in the construction of gender on the body of a yet-to-be-born individual. Institutions police the body into masculine and feminine identity to secure heterosexuality among the sexes. The ultra-feminine ideal is thus established to direct women towards heterosexual procreation and strengthen the roots of the cultural order. Social institutions like schools, religion, hospitals, asylums, and workshops ascertain that women become docile, useful and well-organized machines. These institutions are structured according to the carceral model which judges, assesses, diagnoses, recognizes the normal and abnormal and claims to cure and rehabilitate the individual (Discipline and Punish 304). This is achieved
by exerting influence on the ‘soul’ of an individual which, further, directs her behaviour. In fact, he considers soul to be the prison of the body (30).

The novel concludes with the episode about Satya’s after-life. Her soul is shown to be hovering over the universe, seeking answers that might explain the misery that plagued her as Sardarji’s wife. But she does not receive any satisfying answer. Moreover, she does not realize that it is her suffering and death in which the violent patriarchal ideology finds and establishes its roots. Postmodern feminist theorist like Julia Kristeva state that the entire cultural order is based on the rejection of woman’s namely mother’s body. For Sardarji, Satya’s main attraction is that, like a mother, she is adept at taking care of him and is always ready to give him advice. However, he rejects Satya to beget an heir with Roop, and fulfill the dictates of society. After her demise, Satya remains buried in the thoughts of both Roop and Sardarji and they try their utmost to forget her in the fear of the pain that the disclosure of her memory might bring. In the climax of the novel, it is shown that Satya finds herself condemned again to being born as a girl. The newly re-born Satya realizes she is once more to witness the cycle of violence from which she previously escaped through death. She is aware that her female’s body will eventually be declared as a colony meant to tolerate and carry the burden of society’s expectations. She would be expected to selflessly and stoically allow herself to be plundered in order to fulfill the violent demands and whims of patriarchal male’s perspective. But the new birth also brings the realization that she has to silently accept her fate as any form of rebellion will never improve her situation. According to Satya, the viewpoint of a man, secure about his position in the patriarchal scheme of things, will never change.
The novel thus reveals the symbolic violence of patriarchy in its entirety. Here Baldwin shows both men and women as equal perpetrators of patriarchal oppression. The characters of Sardarji, Bachan Singh, and Jeevan are compared to animals like horses for they are never able to detect the violence erupting around them because their gaze is fixed on achievement of their goals, and fulfillment of their needs. These men deliberately turn a blind eye to anything that might cause them inconvenience. They carelessly ignore the violence of women. Baldwin’s delineation of women like Roop’s grandmother, Gujri, Roop’s two aunts Revathi and Lajo, Huma, Sardarji’s sister Toshi who cajoles and eventually forces her brother to take a second wife, etc. highlight the way in which a woman propels other women to their victimization. All of them are shown to diligently follow the instructions from the patriarchal book of comportment that is ideal for femininity and making sure that their contemporaries and predecessors follow the laid down rules. All the aforementioned female characters in this novel are, in fact, the tallest flag-bearers of patriarchy. Baldwin also throws light on the socio-cultural institutions which are the vector of patriarchy and instrumental in wreaking violence on individuals. These institutions create geographical, physical, psychological, and emotional divisions among people and make sure that their differences are never bridged and the wounds inflicted are never healed. Patriarchy festers and flourishes in social institutions and erupts out of them in order to begin another cycle of violence and suffering.

Foucault states that rules are empty in themselves along with being “violent”, “unfinalized” and impersonal so much so that they can be bent to any purpose. Indeed, patriarchy operates via institutions primarily through the “violent and surreptitious appropriation” and control of the complex mechanism of the system of rules imposed on individuals (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 151). Phallocentrism is contingent upon those who readily invert the meaning of these rules and redirect them against those that are targeted for subjection.