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Objectification of Women and Violence in *What the Body Remembers*

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Abstract

This article discusses the ample illustrations of violence depicted in Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers*. Violence and patriarchal control come to permanently affect the lives of the main female characters, who are first analysed at the small scale of their polygamous marriage, and secondly in the context of the horrifying events of the 1947 Partition. I posit that in the novel we notice an extreme commodification of women, whose bodies become sites for men's competition for respect and territory. Singh Baldwin provides accounts of how male violence is enacted through rape, murder and abductions of women. The literary analysis of the interactions between patriarchy, domestic violence and colonization in the novel concludes that we can establish a clear connection between the idea of intimate colonization and male violent behaviour, whether it is directed at women by their own families or at women's bodies seen as other men's property.

Keywords: violence, patriarchy, women's bodies, discrimination, Shauna Singh Baldwin.

Introduction

What the Body Remembers, Shauna Singh Baldwin's first novel, tells the story of a Sikh family, with all the complications arising from a polygamous marriage, in the context of the atrocious events of the 1947 Partition of India.

Focusing both on intra- and inter-community violence against women, the present study will demonstrate that the female characters in the novel are highly objectified, their bodies becoming instruments for men to use either for their own or for the community's interest. I call this *intimate colonization*, a concept to stand for the various illustrations of violence inflicted on the female characters in the book, shaped both as psychological and physical abuse.

In my pursuit to expound on *intimate colonization* I draw on Ania Loomba's and Susan Sontag's standpoints on (women's) colonization to demonstrate that both familiar and strange men in the novel claim women as territories to be owned, (ab)used, traded and even discarded. This theoretical framework is complemented by Manav Ratti's specific assumptions about Baldwin's male and female characters' colonial mindset, which dictates their behaviour. The author herself (1999) hints to the idea of women as colonized territories either directly, through her characters' words and thoughts ("I too am a colony" (p. 240)), or indirectly through images of India as "a woman raped" (p. 425).

The article will bring evidence that Baldwin's narratorial purposes integrate not only an attack on patriarchal control, but also an indication of how the former colonizers' mindset became appropriated by the colonized and enforced specifically onto women's bodies.

Intimate Colonization

I posit that intra- and inter-community violence against women depicted in Baldwin's novel can be interpreted as illustrations of *intimate colonization*. Therefore, the article will tackle the two types of abuse in an attempt to demonstrate that women's bodies become sites for violence where men display their masculinity, their desire for control and their ethnic or religious clashes.

Susan Sontag was one of the first feminists to connect male dominance and colonization. In her essay "The Third World of Women" (1973) she stated that "[a]ll women live in an 'imperialist' situation in which men are colonialists and women are natives" (p. 184). Sontag's Western feminist stance borrows the context of colonization to stand for inadequate power relations between men and women with women seen as carriers of innocence specific to native populations, powerless in front of a controlling enemy. Sontag (1973) maintains that the situation of women in "economically advanced countries" is "neo-colonialist" explaining that although Western women's overall situation has much improved, "the same basic relations of inferiority and superiority, of powerlessness and power, of cultural underdevelopment and cultural privilege, prevail between women and men in all countries" (p. 185).

Critic Ania Loomba (1998) also links patriarchy and colonization referring to the Indian context. She emphasizes the fact that, besides a tradition of patriarchal constraints in India, male dominance over women might stem from a feeling of inferiority experienced by Indian men under British rule. Loomba forwards the idea that colonialism appears to intensify patriarchy in colonized countries. She attributes this exaggerated tyrannical conduct to the exclusion of native men from the public sphere to the benefit of the colonizers. This social frustration of men appears to stress the already existing patriarchal tradition in India. Yet, according to Loomba (1998), "patriarchal relations provide a model for colonial domination" (p. 161), therefore the two concepts are not only shaping one another, but Loomba considers them essentially connected. If we adopt the critic's assumptions we could infer that, at least in part and at least in the postcolonial space, men tend to dominate women in an attempt to escape their own social demise and end up acting similarly to their oppressors.

Critic Manav Ratti (2013) makes a direct connection between the space of intimacy and colonization which can be detected in Baldwin's novel. He illustrates the colonizing of the Other in the space of intimacy with the example of the conflict between Satya and Roop, the main female characters in the book:

"The violence of colonialism can easily be understood as one nation systematically exploiting another[...]. Gendered violence, such as the violence of the elder, resentful Satya toward the younger, beautiful Roop, [...] becomes a metaphor for the inadequacies of the nation." (Ratti, 2013, p. 122)

Drawing on these theories, I posit that when discussing violence against women in the (post)colonial space illustrated in Baldwin's novel we could speak of a process of *intimate colonization*. The male characters in the book, no matter if familiar or unrelated, continually suppress women. Women's voices are muffled from childhood, Sikh traditions reinterpreted to fit men's desires to maintain control over them. Although Sikh Gurus preached about gender equality, urging men to treat a woman as Kaur (Princess), the reality of things is distorted. Women's role is synthesized by Baldwin (1999) in an old servant's words: " 'A man is pleased', Bebeji said [...]. 'But [...] a woman is merely cracked open for seeding like the earth before the force of the plough. If she is fertile, good for the farmer, if not, bad for her' " (p. 8). In Spivak's

view (2009), women are “metonymized as nothing but the birth canal” (p. 80). I believe this objectification of a woman’s body forms the core of Baldwin’s book.

Whether victims of their families, their own communities or of their ethnic/ religious enemies, the women in *What the Body Remembers* are bereft of rights, opinions or agency. Voiceless territories, the female characters are traded from fathers to husbands, raped and abducted, killed and dismembered to save the honour of their *quom*. The violence of colonization, with natives reduced to silence by the overpowering oppressors, is re-enacted in the space of intimacy. *Intimate colonization* of women becomes the thread along which Shauna Singh Baldwin unfolds her narrative.

“I too am a colony-your colony!”

In the context of the 1947 Partition, intra-community oppression of women, burdened with brutality, did not receive enough attention, according to Kavita Daiya (2008). She stresses the fact that “[i]n a political discourse in which women are symbols of community, the violence against women within communities never became a politicized issue” (p. 80). The critic draws attention to the invisibility of intra-community violence during Partition “articulated with desire, affect, class and race” (p. 80), which should have been tackled by political discourse and historiography alike (p. 60). It is this less visible type of violence that Shauna Singh Baldwin “seeks to restore to view” (Misri, 2011, p. 4).

The complicated fabric of Singh Baldwin’s novel weaves together issues about female identity, male dominance, inter-religious violence, polygamy and patriarchal constraints. The narrative is set in Punjab before and during the 1947 Partition and it tells the story of Roop, a young woman who follows her new husband to Rawalpindi, where she takes the role as his second wife along the older Satya.

From the very beginning it is made apparent that the narrative will focus on women’s inferior social position in India in this timeframe. The world of the 1930s India is a world in which women are passed from fathers to husbands, through arranged marriages, a sign of classic patriarchy, a social system in which girls are “given away in marriage at a very young age into households headed by their husband’s father” (Kandiyoti, 1998, p. 278). It is only through marriage that a woman can receive social status and this precarious position is to be maintained on the condition of her fertility. This is the context in which Baldwin tells the story of the two wives, Roop and Satya.

The novel opens with the thoughts of a newborn spirit who we soon learn is Satya. She is born a woman again, a woman “with her eyes wide open” (Baldwin, 1999, Prologue), and her fate is set right from the start: her wilfulness and desire for respect and gender equality in a world led by men will dictate her unhappiness. The arrival of the second wife pushes Satya into a state of extreme insecurity, which will prompt her to behave horrendously towards the innocent young Roop.

Victims of male dominance and patriarchal constraints, Satya’s and Roop’s behaviours are nonetheless very different. Ashamed by her own barrenness, Satya sees Roop as a threat to her position as mistress of the house. Unable to bear Sardarji an heir, Satya has dedicated her life to managing her husband’s entire estate, hoping that her efforts will compensate for the absence of a

¹ Quoted from Baldwin, 1999, p. 240.

child. When young and fertile Roop is brought into the house, Satya sheds her femininity and assumes the role of a (male) oppressor. She focuses her anger on Roop, who is unaware of the shame she has placed on Satya just by having accepted to be Sardarji's wife. Satya's adoption of male violent behaviour towards women is even more emphasized by the author: "Satya regards the first-born girl in the manner all men saw female children, namely a useless burden." (Baldwin, 1999, p. 226).

The two wives display a deep internalization of what Weldon (2009) calls "an ideology of patriarchal control" (p. 160). And if Satya is adopting the aggressor's position, Roop is submissive to such an extent that she doesn't realize her status as a victim.

Brought up in the spirit of Sikh tradition, Roop knows she will be socially respected as soon as she is married and because of this educational background she is overwhelmed with happiness when Sardarji sends his marriage proposal to her father. Roop's excitement to get married is stemming from a deep fear of social stigma that would permanently affect her life in case no man desires to have her. Besides this social pressure, Roop is hiding a secret about a physical disability which would tarnish her prospects completely: since childhood she has been deaf in one ear, a condition only her father knows about and who will keep this secret from her future husband in order to complete the marriage deal. From Roop's point of view, her father's harsh rules about keeping his girl's reputation intact come from his deep feelings for his daughter, which for Roop are identical to his desire to maintain his social position untarnished:

"Roop had come to dread what-people-will-say. [...] But in Roop that dread runs much deeper than in many other girls, runs deep into bone, for [her father] Bachan Singh's love is a love stronger than any father's in the village. *So this fear of other men looms larger.*" (Baldwin, 1999, p. 103; my emphasis)

As a new wife, Roop learns about another kind of fear: refusing her husband can bring about her doom. When Sardarji tells her to offer her first-born child to Satya, Roop submits dreading her husband's anger. Refusing him would mean Roop's repudiation and her return to Pari Darvaza to her father, as a piece of damaged goods, forever spoiling his reputation in the community. Manav Ratti interprets her submissive attitude as being prompted by yet another type of fear controlling her life: "Roop knows well the patriarchal oppressions around her, but chooses to remain within the system of which they are a part, for that larger system gives her a connectedness with others, which assuages *her fear of being alone.*" (Ratti, 2013, p. 137; my emphasis)

Satya and Roop are victims of *intimate colonization* in so far as they are kept hostage by extreme patriarchal constraints and constant fear. The far-reaching effects of long-term male dominance are illustrated by the author not only through Roop's submissive attitude and Satya's appropriation of male violent behaviour. In Misri's view (2011), "men dominate the domain of storytelling, and even when women tell the stories, it is often men who control the narrative" (p. 5). Roop finds excuses for her father's total control of her fate ("Bachan Singh's love is a love stronger than any father's in the village" (Baldwin, 1999, p. 103)), whereas Satya does not blame Sardarji for his insensitivity since "Sardarji is unconscious of being unkind; he is such a busy man" (Baldwin, 1999, p. 160).

The author suggests that men are colonizers and women are intimate territories without power or agency in an episode of rare closeness between Satya and Roop, with Satya laying down the reality of the world they both inhabit: "I told him [Sardarji], 'I too am a colony—your colony! [...]' 'Now you. [...]' Birds in the same cage." (Baldwin, 1999, p. 240). The two wives are both unable to escape the social trap created by men, forced to struggle to maintain a relationship with

their husband (either by procreating—Roop, or by manipulating situations—Satya), terrified by his absolute power over their lives.

Sardarji's role as intimate colonizer is even more emphasized by Baldwin as she gives her character a British inner voice. Born from Sardarji's years of education in England, Cunningham "literally represents the internalization of a colonial mindset" (Ratti, 2013, p. 134). He stands for Sardarji's aspirations to be a gentleman, well respected by all, including the British rule. When Roop runs away to her father's home, dreading poisoning by Satya, Cunningham's voice comments: " 'Such ingratitude,' says Cunningham [...]. 'A common failing of Indians' " (Baldwin, 1999, p. 269). Sardarji's attitude and behaviour are ruled by a schizophrenic relationship between his Indian (patriarchal) roots and his British (superior/ colonial) education. Interestingly enough, it is his unusual hybridized perspective that saves Roop from his wrath: " 'Cunningham, what Roop has done—we Sikhs call it haumai. It is what you call 'simply not done.' 'I wouldn't dream of using force, if I were you,' Cunningham says. 'You're a gentleman and a negotiator—it's simply not done.' " (Baldwin, 1999, p. 274).

Even though Sardarji would have been entitled to repudiate Roop and keep the children, he does not. Instead, he retrieves Roop from her childhood home and decides to move house to Lahore and to leave Satya behind in the Rawalpindi house. His reasons are far from being motivated by an emotional attachment: "[...] the years in England had taught Sardarji to think without feeling. [...] He has steeled himself against passion of all kinds—anger, love, tenderness—meeting them all with logic and ambition" (Baldwin, 1999, p. 186). Sardarji's choice of Roop over Satya is rooted in his selfishness and his desire to be in complete control over a woman's actions:

"Yes, he chooses Roop over Satya, chooses to take Roop to Lahore. Roop will listen to him admiringly, carefully, her eyes upon his mouth as if ropes of pearls fell from his lips, while Satya has never lowered her eyes before him and carries herself far too confidently." (Baldwin, 1999, p. 286)

It is Satya's nature as an assertive woman which brings about her failure as a Sikh wife and which will ultimately lead her to commit suicide. Satya can be seen as the most complex character in the novel, as she is not only depicted as a victim of *intimate colonization*, but also as a woman whose strong personality is well ahead of her time, trying to escape the confines of a world in which she has no value. In her final days, she comes to understand that, in the mechanisms of a society which denies her any worth, she has become herself blinded by the same ideology, she has directed her anger at a woman who was, in her turn, only a bird in a cage (Baldwin, 1999, p. 240). After having purposefully kissed a woman suffering of tuberculosis to find her own death, Satya has a clear perspective over her existence and her mistakes: "I have learned only the actions of taking, the pleasures of snatching like a man [...]. I have become all I hated in Roop—dependent, grasping, begging for the leftovers of his love. (Baldwin, 1999, p. 309). Satya is aware of her own errors in judging Roop as her enemy, she understands that it was jealousy that blinded her thinking, and she re-evaluates her life by determining the true source for all her suffering: the extreme patriarchal system which allowed her husband to have complete control over her life. In her final hours, Satya is musing about a future deprived of injustice and discrimination, a future in which women are not property to be exchanged:

"Surely there will come a time when just being can bring *izzat* in return, when a woman will be allowed to choose her owner, when a woman will not be owned, when love will be enough payment for marriage, children or no children [...]." (Baldwin, 1999, p. 310; emphasis in original)

After Satya's death, her presence is still felt throughout the narrative. She inhabits Roop's thoughts ("[...] *why does Satya live in my mind?*" (Baldwin, 1999, p. 330; emphasis in original)) and she is part of Sardarji's consciousness as well: "The isn't-ness of Satya has been rankling in him. Satya lives in the thought realm now. Inaccessible. And precisely because she is inaccessible, Sardarji mourns her, reaches for her in his sleep, sometimes." (Baldwin, 1999, p. 338)

Having been a source of fear for Roop and one of aggravation for Sardarji, the memory of Satya is nevertheless vivid and it speaks from beyond the grave. The writer allows us to enter the spirit realm and we hear Satya's thoughts while she is waiting to reincarnate. Her spirit is still linked to the world of the living and in the story we notice the influence she has on Roop and her own personal development. Roop will forget the pain she has suffered at the hands of Satya and she will perceive her as a source of strength and inspiration in the days of extreme violence of the 1947 Partition. During those harsh days, Roop learns to tap into her memories of the strong woman who was Satya and she will feel empowered to face hardships with an assertiveness emulating Satya's personality.

The Female Body as Site of Violence—the 1947 Partition

In 1947, at the end of the British Raj established in India in 1858, the subcontinent declared its independence. This historical moment of great importance that meant the end of India as a colony engendered a series of political-religious problems due to the heterogeneity of the subcontinent. Thus, in 1947, the Partition of India was decided through the Indian Independence Act on the basis of religious differences. This meant the dislocation of huge numbers of people who had to relocate, either in the Muslim Pakistan or in the (mostly) Hindu India. Unfortunately, this historical event was accompanied by a wave of violence that was estimated to almost a million dead people. Children were slaughtered and women were killed, raped or abducted. According to Menon and Bhasin (2011), the "official estimate of the number of abducted women was placed at 50,000 Muslim women in India and 33,000 non-Muslim women in Pakistan" (p. 122).

The separation of the former colonial India into two countries was experienced as an Us—Them divide, placing Muslims and Hindus in direct conflict. The large Sikh community was caught in the middle of this tension and *What the Body Remembers* gives a detailed account of how extensive inter-community violence was during those terrible times.

According to Belén Martín-Lucas (2013), the female body in the context of inter-community conflicts should be read as a "the territory of dispute suffering from the 'softer' indoctrination from diverse socialization agents on silent obedience, to the extreme violence of abduction, rape, mutilation and/or murder when armed conflict erupts [...]" (p. 92). Menon and Bhasin (2011) had previously forwarded the interpretation of the female body as extremely objectified and as a carrier of nationalistic meaning, in their historiographical account of violence against women in India during the 1947 Partition. In their view, "women's sexuality symbolizes 'manhood'" (p. 43) and therefore the horrible attacks on women belonging to Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities were meant to be seen as an assertion of men's "identity and a simultaneous humiliation of the Other by "dishonouring" their women" (p. 41).

In Part Eight of *What the Body Remembers*, the author tells the story of the 1947 tragic events as Roop and her family experience them. The violence of those days meant Roop's encounter with yet another type of fear: fear of being raped or killed by Muslim attackers. Critic

Bharati Ray (2005) believes that men raping the women of their enemies during Partition, or “power rape”, as she coins it, needs to be construed as “significant because the rape of a woman is akin to the rape of the community to which she belongs” (p. xxxiv). Women belonging to all the ethnic or religious communities involved in the conflict were victims of power rape and murders. Since patriarchy had constructed women as “communal property” (Daiya, 2008, p. 80), men from both sides of the divide, including the Sikh community caught in the middle, displayed the same intra- and inter-community violent behaviour.

During this male battle fought on female territories, Baldwin hints to a bond between women regardless of their ethnicity. In a tensed and moving episode, the author lays emphasis on a unique connection born between women, one that transcends boundaries of religion or social class. Being a civil servant, Sardarji cannot accompany Roop and the children on their escape to Delhi, so Roop leaves together with an old female Muslim servant. On their way, Muslim hooligans stop them. Roop fears Jorimon, her servant, will betray them as being Sikh and they will be killed, but she soon finds out that the Muslim servant has saved their lives: “No longer are they mistress and maidservant—from *this moment, they are just women, equally vulnerable*” (Baldwin, 1999, p. 420; my emphasis).

Hostility and terror define those days. Roop witnesses and learns about extreme acts of violence, “women abducted, mutilated, always by *them*—never by *us*” (Baldwin, 1999, p. 431; emphasis in original). Baldwin (1999) suggests that women’s bodies become sites of male violence: “Men etch their anger upon woman-skin, swallow their pride dissolved in women’s blood” (p. 431). Indeed, as Nayak and Scholar (2003) comment, “the author makes visible the way displacement, abduction, rapes, and murders systematically marked women’s bodies to signify community, nation, and state” (p. 1).

Shauna Singh Baldwin positions Roop as a fearful witness of the threatening days of the Partition atrocities. From her brother, Jeevan, she learns about the tragedy of her sister-in-law, Kusum, found dead and mutilated in Roop’s childhood home. His words are illustrative for how men objectify women to serve their needs of violence and revenge:

“Rape is one man’s message to another: ‘I took your pawn—your move.’ [...] He [Jeevan] received the message. Kusum’s womb, the same from which his three sons came, had been delivered. Ripped out. And the message, ‘We will stamp your kind, your very species from existence. This is no longer merely about izzat or land. This is a war against your quom, for all time. Leave. We take the womb so there can be no Sikhs from it, we take the womb, leave you its shell.’” (Baldwin, 1999, p. 447)

Women, seen as mere procreators, shells that hide fertile wombs through which legacies are transmitted, become sites for male violence. Rape, torture, abduction and murder of women were messages to be sent to men on the other side of the conflict. Kusum’s death and dismemberment is central in this final part of the book. We learn about her tragic end from two male sources: first from Jeevan, her husband, and then from her father-in-law, Bachan Singh. Critic Deepti Misri (2011) suggests that Kusum’s dismembered and re-membered body could be read as Baldwin’s metaphoric interpretation of the Partition of the subcontinent. Indeed, Kusum’s story incorporates both inter- and intra-community violence in a grotesque manner. Roop is shocked to find out that it was her father who had killed Kusum to prevent her from being dishonoured by Muslim attackers. Bachan Singh’s actions were apparently prompted by his Sikh faith which urged him to pre-emptively sacrifice (see Misri 2011) Kusum to save her honour hence her family’s respectability:

“[...] *Papaji* thinks that for good-good women, death should be preferable to dishonour. “In your mama’s room, I said the first lines of the Japji to give me strength, and to guide my kirpan. [...] “I raised my kirpan high above her head. Vaheguru did not stop it, it came down.” (Baldwin, 1999, p. 456; emphasis in original)

The two male voices that narrate Kusum’s death, Jeevan’s and Bachan Singh’s, reduce her very existence to a site for masculine conflict and representation. Her extreme suffering is missing from the male discourse. Jeevan’s description is outrageous in so far as he interprets his wife’s dismembered body as “accepting”, as if she had welcomed her murder.

“ ‘She looked accepting’ [...]. ‘Almost as if she had been dismembered by her own hand. But that, I told myself, that is impossible. Can a woman ask for someone to do this to her? How can she actually desire it, move to her captor with a smile on her lips?’” (Baldwin, 1999, p. 447)

Extreme patriarchy is dictating Jeevan’s rationale. Kusum’s delivered womb does not stand for an act of violence and desecration of his beloved wife, but for a message: “ ‘I took your pawn—your move ’ ” (Baldwin, 1999, p. 447). Misri (2011) advocates that both Jeevan and his father believe to be the victims of the violent acts inflicted on Kusum’s body. She is objectified to such an extent that she becomes solely the bearer of violent messages from their enemies, that her dismemberment is rather an “insult to Sikh masculinity” (Misri, 2011, p. 11) and not an atrocious act.

As we have seen in the previous part of this study, intense patriarchy had distorted the Sikh construal of women as men’s equals, respected, beloved and cherished *princesses* (Kaur). Women live in men’s shadows, men “see their women from the corner of each eye” (Baldwin, 1999: 43). Kusum’s tragic fate speaks about the dispensability (Misri, 2011, p. 16) of all women depicted in the book. Baldwin also includes in the narrative the still images of raped women who face the peril of rejection when they are reunited with their own families. Roop sees them in the groups of refugees in Delhi: “The silent women are the ones who were raped; even widows pity *their* kismat; families with any sense of izzat are not likely to take them back” (Baldwin, 1999, p. 440; emphasis in original).

It is made clear that family izzat (respectability) is more valuable than any woman’s life. Raped women are damaged goods, bearers of a stigma that would weigh heavy on the image of a respectable family and therefore they are shunned. In their detailed study, Nayak and Scholar (2003) comment that “Baldwin’s account of Sikh women’s struggles during Partition effectively reveals the social practices aimed at controlling and containing women’s bodies.” (Nayak & Scholar, 2003, p. 4)

After the Partition atrocities, the two governments of India and Pakistan began an extensive recovery operation of the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh women abducted during the conflicts of 1947. This process lasted until 1956 and according to Butalia (1999) 22,000 Muslim women and 8,000 Hindu and Sikh women were brought back to their families (p. 123).

Conclusions

Read by critics and researchers as a novel about extreme patriarchy and “as living archives of violence and war” (Misri, 2011, p. 20), *What the Body Remembers* also hides a story about the internalization of a colonial mindset and its consequences in the private lives of Baldwin’s characters.

We have seen that both the female protagonists and the other women in the book are all victims of *intimate colonization*, a concept including intra- and inter-community violent acts inflicted on women.

Satya and Roop display a deep internalization of “an ideology of patriarchal control” (Weldon, 2009, p. 160) that pushes them into either adopting male violent behaviour (in the case of Satya) or into an attitude of total submission (the case of Roop). To a certain extent and by using two different standpoints, Satya and Roop support male dominance. This situation is best described and justified by Moore (1986):

The fact that women may end up supporting the dominant male order in their efforts to value themselves within it does not imply that women’s interests are ultimately identical with those of men. On the contrary, women recognise the conflict of interests between themselves and men, but are trying to identify themselves as valuable, social individuals. (pp. 184-185)

Satya’s adoption of male specific behaviour is illustrative of what Audre Lorde (1994) described as “that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (p. 123). Although Satya wishes to move past the limitations imposed on her by the male dominant society, she will not succeed and will, in fact, perpetuate (male) violent behaviour.

Baldwin’s novel speaks about the harsh situation of Indian women, whether Sikh, Muslim or Hindu, bonded by their condition as victims of *intimate colonization* inflicted on them both by familiar men and enemies of their community. Instruments for procreation and “goods” transferred from fathers to husbands, women become metaphors of either respect or dishonour for their families. They are commodified and objectified losing any worth other than the one which men inscribe on them. This theme is central in the book and the author emphasizes it through Satya’s musings beyond the world of the living. When her spirit learns about the new reincarnation, her invisible body, the one she carries with her in memory, follows her in the new life:

“I, Satya, return from silence. [...] Again am I born a woman. [...] Foolish girl-child with two whole lungs to scream and *a body that remembers*, remembers the thought, remembers the un-thought, the good deeds and the bad, even as others remember only the bad. [...] I do not need to understand words to know he is disappointed I am not a boy. [...] I have come so far, [...] *But men have not yet changed.*” (Baldwin, 1999, pp. 470-471; my emphasis)

The distance between Satya’s first birth (1895) and her second incarnation (1965), captured by the author in the Prologue and Epilogue of her novel, does not represent a period in which the status of women in India has dramatically changed. Although seventy years have passed, the spirit of Satya still perceives in the attitude of her new father a disappointment about her gender. This circular quality of Shauna Singh Baldwin’s book, starting and ending with a female spirit’s meditations about women’s fate in a men’s world is illustrative for the writer’s intentions. Ratti (2013) believes the author “has written this novel not simply to ‘write back’ to nations, colonial powers, and men, but to explore the inherent dignity and dynamism of women and Sikhs” (p. 132).

Indeed, Satya and mature Roop disbelieve Sikh men’s discourses of love, respectability and honour. Aware that women’s bodies are seen as fertile lands in which men plant their seeds (Baldwin, 1999, p. 8), devoid of any other worth, the main female characters cast doubt on the male (Sikh) discourse. What critic Ratti (2013) interprets as the author’s exploration of “dignity and dynamism of women and Sikhs” (p. 132) is made apparent to readers mostly through Satya’s and Roop’s sceptical interpretation of men’s stories. Yet, their considerations on the true

intentions of their men are either “quiet hesitations” (Misri, 2011, p. 13), in Roop’s case, or contemplations beyond the grave, in Satya’s circumstance. Neither women have the power to change their condition, subjugated as they are by the men of their *quom*. Their only power resides in their capacity and duty to *remember*: “[...] *I must remember*, thinks Roop. *I must remember Kusum’s body*” (Baldwin 1999, p. 451; emphasis in original).

Drawing on her own grandmother’s diary and the accounts of women surviving Partition gathered by Butalia (1999), the author created a fictional work that *re-members* the memory of Indian women. Shauna Singh Baldwin’s novel salvages the story of women who *remember* their truth beyond (male) political discourse.

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