

# The Violence of Memory: Renarrating Partition Violence in Shauna Singh Baldwin's What the Body Remembers

## Abstract:

This article explores how Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* builds on Partition feminist historiography in order to exhume and retell the story of family violence against women during India's Partition, intended to "save their honor" from rioting mobs. While feminist historiographies have restored Partition survivors' memories of violence to the historical archive, Baldwin's novel explicitly foregrounds the role of gendered bodies in and as the archive of communal memories of violence. I begin with Baldwin's exploration of the embodied character of Sikh subject-formation in a pre-Partition border community, and close in, like the novel itself, on a key moment of embodied violence: the cutting up and reassembling of a woman's body, whose manner of death is later reconstructed by her male family members, in the presence of a female family member. My analysis shows how the text's layering of perspectives around this body encodes a feminist hermeneutics of doubt and models a critical practice of "reading between the lines" in order to recover the violence suppressed in the text of patriarchal memory. Furthermore, I argue, the woman's dismembered, re-membered body in the text allegorizes the processes of disfigurement through which women's bodies are routinely produced as "dead metaphors" for patriarchal honor; as well as the project of remembering violence differently, which the novel itself endorses.

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"I told you the truth," I say yet again, "Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own."

(Rushdie 1981, 211)

*What is remembered in the body is well remembered.*

(Scarry 1985, 109)

*So powerful and general was the belief that safeguarding a woman's honour is essential to upholding male and community honour that a whole new order of violence came into play, by men against their own kinswomen; and by women against their own daughters or sisters and their own selves.*

(Menon and Bhasin 1998, 44)

## Family Violence, Memory's Truth

It is now a commonplace that in 1947, as Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh mobs fought one another in the violence of India's Partition, women became, in the way that is typical of war, the primary symbolic and literal targets of communal violence. Feminist historians of the Partition have observed that in addition to the staggering range of sexual brutalities women suffered from rioting mobs, another prevalent form of violence against women had long remained unacknowledged—although highly visible—in the powerful cultural memory of the Partition: the pre-emptive "sacrifice" of women by their families in order to save family and community honor.

It is not that such deaths were unknown or unremembered. Tales of women going to "honorable" deaths with stoic resolve have been only too pervasive in the South Asian cultural imaginary, ranging from the deified practices of *sati* (self-immolation by widows upon the death of their husbands) to *jauhar*, a form of mass suicide by immolation supposedly committed by Rajput women in medieval India in order to avoid capture and violation by enemy Muslim armies. The suicides of women during the Partition fit quite neatly within these heroic narratives of women's self-sacrifice and were memorialized accordingly. For instance, Urvashi Butalia

and Purnima Mankekar have drawn attention to an iconic scene in Govind Nihalani's television series *Tamas*, in which a large number of Sikh women heroically stride to the communal well in order to commit mass suicide—a scene that Mankekar recounts had recalled *jauhar* for her upper-caste Hindu friend, and doubtless for other Hindu viewers as well (Butalia 1998, 164; Mankekar 1999, 313).<sup>1</sup>

What had been effaced in these popular and often spectacular memorializations of Partition, then, was never the fact that women had died for the sake of family honor, but that such deaths constituted a violence. The brave Sikh women (so the story went) gave up their own lives proudly, willingly rather than have their honor besmirched by Muslim mobs.

However, since the publication in 1998 of two landmark feminist oral histories, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries* and Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, this “memory's truth” has come to be vigorously contested by feminist scholars, writers, and filmmakers, who have produced their own narratives to transform the ways in which these deaths have been popularly remembered (Rushdie 1981, 211). In this article I wish to examine one such narrative, Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999), which builds on feminist historiography of the Partition in order to question the patriarchal remembering of such killings as “martyrdom,” “bravery,” “duty,” or “sacrifice” on the part of the women who died in these tragedies.<sup>2</sup>

Although Baldwin specifies a debt to Butalia's oral history in the novel's acknowledgments, it would be a mistake, I think, to take the novel as merely derivative in its exploration of gendered violence and memory. As I hope to show, literature's very borrowings from historiography may best reveal the distinctive ways in which it can elucidate and remake the memory and meaning of violence in the cultural domain. In the discussion below I follow Jill Didur's caution to critically preserve the “literariness” of Partition fiction, rather than taking such fiction as unmediated “evidence” of the subjective experiences of historical actors.<sup>3</sup> Moving away from understandings of Partition fiction as “merely subjective, mimetic, and universal,” Didur argues that “a staged dialogue between literary and historiographical narratives puts pressure on totalizing constructions of the self, experience and agency and their relation to the notion of citizenship in the modern nation-state” (Didur 2006, 44). I work here with the understanding that Baldwin's novel is not merely an exercise in relaying

women's experiences of Partition violence (although that is a significant project in itself), any more than Butalia's oral history is simply a documentation of survivor testimonies. My aim then is to draw attention to the narrative strategies by which *What the Body Remembers* stages both the violence of women's sacrificial deaths as well as the rhetorical effacement of that violence. My reading below considers the literary strategies by which the novel demonstrates how patriarchal communal narratives produce a cognitive blindness with regard to embodied violence against women, a violence that the novel itself seeks to restore to view.

### Violence, Memory, and Embodiment in *What the Body Remembers*

Roughly spanning the two decades leading up to the Partition, *What the Body Remembers* tells the story of Roop, the daughter of Bachan Singh, a man with some clout in the border village of Pari Darwaza in pre-Partition Punjab. Impressed from a young age with the inevitability of marriage and children, sixteen-year-old Roop accepts a proposal from the middle-aged landowner Sardarji, whose first wife Satya had borne no children. A rivalry between the two develops; the enraged older wife Satya commits suicide shortly before Partition, and shortly after her death Roop and Sardarji, finding themselves within the boundaries of the newly drawn country of Pakistan, journey across the border to India to start life anew. Baldwin's synoptic novel of almost 500 pages offers a thick description of this border community, dwelling on the gendered processes of Sikh subjectification, and particularly on the ways in which men and women are enjoined to "remember" community through both narrative and embodied acts. The final moments of violence in the novel are to be read within this pre-set framework, wherein Baldwin explores the many kinds of memory work that gendered bodies do for the communal body.

As Ernst Renan famously wrote over a century ago, "[f]orgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation" (Renan 1990, 11). It is conversely the case that nations are imagined by the creative and often inventive activity of collective remembering. Theorists of nationalism have frequently suggested that the reproduction of nations and other imagined communities is contingent on the performance of regular acts of memory that draw upon the community's shared past to propel it into the future. Thus, Benedict Anderson writes that nations

inevitably seem to “loom out of an immemorial past”; so crucial is that sense of “hoary antiquity” to the existence of nations that history and tradition are often, as Eric Hobsbawm has observed, simply invented (Anderson 1983, 11; Hobsbawm 1983). In Homi Bhabha’s influential formulation, the nation is a discursive entity “narrated” into being in two simultaneous registers: the pedagogical and the performative, the former looking back to the past and the latter looking ahead to the future, the two modes together constituting what Tom Nairn names the “the modern Janus” of the nation (Nairn 1977/2003; Bhabha 1994). Whereas these theorists have largely emphasized how the nation is produced and sustained through a series of iterated narrative practices, feminist scholars such as Anne McClintock, Gayatri Gopinath, and Kavita Daiya have drawn attention to material and embodied aspects of nation-construction, underscoring the constitutive role of gendered bodies, and specifically the heterosexual reproductive imperative that nations enforce in order to regenerate themselves. Articulating these insights on nation, community, and gendered bodies, *What the Body Remembers* dramatizes the regenerative impulses of the community via twin themes of storytelling and sexual reproduction, two parallel modes of “remembering” through which the Sikh community in the novel perpetuates itself psychically and physically. Both modes of remembering, Baldwin suggests, are deeply gendered and embodied, and certainly the novel’s title speaks to its close exploration of gendered bodies as the material repositories as well as producers of communal memory.

The novel consistently reflects upon the power of storytelling in the formation of Sikh subjectivity. Assimilating diverse and sometimes competing “stories” narrated by different characters, it cues the reader early on that in fact, “stories are not told for the telling, but for the teaching,” drawing attention to its own pedagogical intent (Baldwin 1999, 46). Within the novel, men dominate the domain of storytelling, and even when women tell the stories, it is often men who control the narrative. As a child, Roop witnesses her father narrate to her brother Jeevan stories about Sikh martyrs, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and the marginalization of the Sikh community by Indian nationalists, as he seeks to instill in his son a consciousness of his distinct Sikh identity (43–48). Following Partition, the adult Roop observes to herself that her father’s telling of Partition “is the telling she will have to tell Jeevan’s sons one day,” her own disagreements notwithstanding (456). Baldwin’s novel itself, however, seeks to

intrude upon the masculine domain of storytelling by absorbing and retelling the stories told by men from within the feminist framework of its own fictional discourse. As it reflects upon the psychic effects of such storytelling in the life of the community, the novel also strains to establish that the stories exchanged between men and heard or passed on by women have decidedly corporeal effects for both.

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry observes that “What is ‘remembered’ in the body is well remembered” (Scarry 1985, 109). Scarry attempts here to make visible “the political identity of the body,” which, she writes, “is usually learned unconsciously, effortlessly and very early” (109). She suggests that “the presence of learned culture in the body” is not merely inscribed upon or imposed from without the body, but must also be seen as arising from *within* the body, given the body’s “refusal . . . to disown its own early circumstances, its mute and often beautiful insistence on absorbing into its rhythms and postures the signs that it inhabits a particular space at a particular time” (109). A similar concept of bodily memory is at work in *What the Body Remembers*, which suggests that memory comes to inhere not only in narrative but also in the very body of the listener. Thus the novel explores how “the political identity of the [Sikh] body” is produced and secured through a repertoire of stories—particularly through stories of embodied suffering, for the stories that stick in the body are stories *about* bodies (109). These range from Bachan Singh’s narration to his son Jeevan of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre with its martyred Sikh bodies, to the Sikh Aardas, featuring “the forty Sikhs who stood by the Guru at his last battle against a Mughal tyrant; Sikhs cut limb from limb by Muslim tyrants; two sons of the tenth Guru bricked up alive in a wall for their refusal to convert to Islam; martyrs whose scalps were removed; men who were tied to wheels and their bodies broken to pieces; men and women who were cut by saws and flayed alive by Mughal emperors for their faith, but did not convert to Islam” (Baldwin 1999, 50).

It is through such remembrance rituals and narrative practices that the memory of historical violence, and of other violated bodies, descends into the body of the listener and hardens into instinct. The novel illustrates effectively how the representational apparatus of Sikh communal culture produces a “martyrological consciousness” integral to the processes of Sikh (and particularly Sikh male) subjectification in a moment of violent political transition.<sup>4</sup> Thus later in the novel, Roop’s husband Sardarji is

unreasonably apprehensive about Muslims because “Sardarji’s body remembers life-preserving fear, passed down centuries in lori rhymes his mother sang him, in paintings displayed in the Golden Temple Museum in Amritsar, in poem and in story” (339). The body, thus shaped within the archive of communal memory about other bodies, itself becomes the archive of such memories.

If, in the novel, men remember through a regulated set of narratives, women literally re-member community through reproduction. At various points in *What the Body Remembers*, women are reminded that having babies “is what women are for”: this ideology is responsible for the death of Roop’s mother in childbirth as she tries to deliver yet another child; it is what occasions the entry of the young and fertile Roop into the household of Sardarji; and it leads to the eventual ejection from the same household of Roop’s jealous co-wife Satya, whose barrenness only adds offense to her stubborn, quarrelsome, and already “unwomanly” disposition. If this cherished re-membering capacity of women’s bodies constrains them in everyday life, it renders them particularly vulnerable in times of communal strife. In the novel, the most tragic fallout of this imperative to reproduce becomes evident toward the conclusion, in the horrifying fate that befalls the women of Pari Darwaza, who are sorted for various kinds of violence according to their reproductive potential.

The key act of violence, however, which unifies the novel’s thematic concerns and preoccupies most of its concluding chapters, is that which befalls Roop’s sister-in-law Kusum during the turmoil of Partition. Back in Pari Darwaza, Kusum is killed, her womb removed, and her body cut up in multiple acts of horrendous violation, with the dismembered fragments then reassembled. Explicitly recalling the novel’s title—*What the Body Remembers*—this dismembered, re-membered body compels a close reading in light of the novel’s preceding exploration of gendered, embodied remembering. Following the family’s exodus to India, Kusum’s husband Jeevan and her father-in-law father Bachan Singh, both of whom have seen Kusum’s body at different stages of dismemberment, give their separate accounts of Kusum’s death and mutilation to Roop, who is curious to learn what happened to the women of Pari Darwaza: Kusum, Roop’s paternal aunt Revati Bhua, and the family’s long-serving maidservant Gujri. My own reading below will focus on these testimony scenes in order to examine two related aspects of Baldwin’s complex construction of the events surrounding Kusum’s death.

The first is the manner in which those events are narrativized in the testimonies of the two male family members. The second is the refracted image of Kusum's mutilated body itself, emerging as it does in the text only through the layered perspectives of these male testifiers. These two aspects of the novel's representation of violence together point toward the disfiguring violence of representation through which violence against women seems to disappear from view.

### “Listening in Stereo”: Gender and Testimonial Discourse

The testimony scenes in *What the Body Remembers* borrow heavily from the testimonial accounts of Partition survivors in Butalia's book *The Other Side of Silence*. These scenes also illustrate what feminist historiographers identify as a “gendered telling of violence,” which distinguishes men's dominant narrations from those of women, in whose testimonies silences are often as or more telling than speech (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 54). The master narrative of such events within the family or community is constituted by men's stories, which are typically “told in the heroic mode” and emphasize the valor of the dead woman through a strict disavowal of fear and pain (55). Women's narrations, on the other hand, gender the realities of their lived experience differently—even though they might appear to broadly resemble the dominant narration of the men, they depart at significant points to challenge male narrations, if only implicitly. Ethnographers have found that it is often the silences of women (often signaling non-agreement, for instance) rather than what is explicitly said, that draw the tangent from male narrations. This is why, as oral historians Kathryn Andersen and Dana C. Jack put it, “[t]o hear women's perspectives accurately, we have to learn to listen in stereo, receiving both the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them” (quoted in Butalia 1998, 280). Baldwin's construction of the testimony scenes urges in the reader precisely such a practice of reception by giving textual form to the dominant and muted channels of narration around violence.

The novel uses four devices to deconstruct the eyewitness narrations of men and reveal them as “tellings”—self-interested creative narrations, even fictions, rather than objective chronicles of fact. One of the main techniques Baldwin uses to foreground the interpretive quality of the men's own narrations is a complex manipulation of male and female



perspectives in the testimony scenes, where the eyewitness narrations of the male testifiers are largely focalized through their female listener Roop. Whereas the narrative control in each of these scenes belongs to the men, it is nevertheless the perspective of their female listener that most often prevails in them. The second device consists of Baldwin's insertion of italicized text to provide Roop's alternate perspective, setting it in relief to the dominant male narrations of Jeevan and her father. Third, the testimonial narrations of the men are marked by internal inconsistencies that call into question their interpretive as well as their factual reliability. Finally, Baldwin constructs a motif of ambivalent evidence across the two testimonies in order to challenge the neat projection of violence outside the familial, communal, and individual self in the men's narrations.

These devices effectively foreground the structure and significance of the telling itself, rather than allowing the reader's attention to be monopolized by the events described therein. They puncture these male narratives in order to make space for the muted perspectives of women with regard to gendered violence within the family; and significantly, they caution the reader to approach the men's accounts with the same skepticism that is manifest in Roop's reception of them. If the men's stories are representative of the dominant modes of telling through which the account of violence has come down through memory, Roop's consciousness suggests a model of *skeptical listening* through which such tellings have been received by women and must be received by future listeners. In this way, Baldwin disrupts the tendency of the (largely male) eyewitness narration of such violence to be taken as the authoritative or "truthful" one, encouraging critical readings of the same and highlighting the interpretive dimension of the eyewitness account. Ultimately, the novel's testimony scenes are set up not to reveal the extent of truth, lies, or misunderstanding in eyewitness accounts, but to reveal how such accounts often embody and provide the narrative optics through which violence can disappear—even as blood can be seen. The novel accordingly inculcates in the reader a doubting interpretive stance by foregrounding the relation between violence and representation.

Jeevan—Kusum's husband and Roop's brother—narrates his story first, recounting his rescue mission to Pari Darwaza to bring the family out to safety. As Jeevan tells his story, the text frequently shifts perspectives between Jeevan and Roop, so that the reader alternates between "seeing" the

events at Pari Darwaza as focalized through Jeevan, and “hearing” Jeevan’s account from the perspective of Roop in the act of listening. The shifting perspective reveals a gap between the factual details of what Jeevan sees, and his questionable *interpretation* of those details as he recounts them to Roop, whose act and modes of listening are foregrounded in the text. Reaching the house at Pari Darwaza, Jeevan narrates, he had found it unlocked and empty. In the kitchen, he had noticed, “pots rolled past dried pools of their contents, like the severed heads of martyrs”—the image already prefigured in the tales of Sikh martyrdom that Jeevan has grown up with, and now foreshadowing his discovery of the fate of his wife Kusum (Baldwin 1999, 446). He goes into his dead mother’s room, lights a match and sees “strange shapes backed up against the wall, [his mother’s] and Kusum’s dowry trunks thrown open, chunnis bordered with woven gold, lehengas, salwars, kameezes spilling over their sides, as if trying to flee” (446). He finds at his feet a “simple, white-clad mound” in the center of the room. Lifting the corner of the sheet he had found: “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” (446). The body, he had realized, was Kusum’s.

Now the text switches to direct exchange as Jeevan observes: “[Kusum] looked accepting . . . Almost as if she had been dismembered by her own hand. But that, I told myself, 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?” (447). He continues, describing Kusum’s body as he had found it, speculating on what had happened to her:

Her hand was like this—unclenched. Her feet were like this—not poised to run. Her legs cut neatly at the thigh, why, they surely must have used a sword or more than one! Why were her legs not bloody? To cut a woman apart *without first raping*—a waste, surely. Rape is one man’s message to another: “I took your pawn. Your move.” (447, italics added)

Nevertheless certain that there must be a message in this dismembered body, Jeevan had drawn back the sheet and deciphered it: Kusum’s womb had been ripped out and taken away. And Jeevan “reads” this message thus: “We take the womb so there can be no Sikhs from it, we take the womb, leave you its shell” (447).

Resonant in Jeevan’s story are a number of elements that typify familial accounts regarding the violation of women in the family: the denial of rape

within the family, the understanding of rape and reproductive violence as a communication between male members of the *quom* (community), and a reduction of the embodied nature of such violence to a merely semiotic act—that is, to a “message.” The most striking part of Jeevan’s telling is his outright rejection of the possibility that Kusum was raped before being dismembered, in clear contradiction to the physical evidence of her mutilated body. As Jeevan tells it, Kusum’s legs were “cut neatly at the thigh,” probably using more than one sword, and yet “not bloody”—which leads Jeevan to conclude that Kusum was not raped. The text alerts us to the seeming implausibility of Jeevan’s understanding through the muted thoughts of Roop: “*Even in death he can see Kusum only from the corners of his eyes,*” Roop reflects, “[f]or how can he know, how does he know, if she was raped or not, when he has heard the same stories I have heard?” (446, italics in original). Instead, Jeevan wishes to perceive Kusum as the agent of her own death, “as if she had been dismembered by her own hand” (447, my italics).

Further, Jeevan’s own reckoning that the dismemberment was a “waste” if rape was not involved, reveals his own clear understanding of what such an act would and should properly comprise in order to be effective: first rape, then mutilation. (Yet he denies the possibility that such violence may have indeed befallen his “own” woman.) Underlying his statements is a sure understanding that rape is a violation between men, “one man’s message to another,” rather than an embodied violation against the woman in question. The certitude with which Jeevan looks for, finds, and “reads” the message in the mutilated body betrays his perfect acquiescence to the patriarchal terms on which such brutal violence against women acquires significance as a semiotic rather than an embodied act, such that it is the male recipients of the message who become the victims of the violent act, rather than the women whose bodies were made to bear the violent inscription. As Jeevan sees it, the primary offense of Kusum’s death lies not in the suffering that his wife must have endured, nor even in the violation of her bodily integrity after her death, but rather in the insult to Sikh masculinity that the violated body represents.

Bachan Singh’s testimony (situated in the text immediately after Jeevan’s) gives a fuller account of the happenings at Pari Darwaza and the fate of Kusum, Revati Bhua, and Gujri. The details in Bachan Singh’s account provide a crucial corrective to Jeevan’s interpretation of the events, although underpinned by the same patriarchal understanding evident in

Jeevan's testimony—of woman as a synonymous with communal borders, her significance contained in and by her womb. When the mob had arrived at Pari Darwaza, Bachan Singh tells Roop, he had thought quickly and decided that of the women in the family, Kusum alone presented a real concern to him, being still in her reproductive years. Acting decisively he had called to Kusum and told her how he must act upon the advice of the community leaders. To this, he narrates, Kusum consented readily, only asking him to take her to the front room so that her sons did not hear her cry out. Only at this point does the text reveal that Kusum was in fact killed by Bachan Singh himself as he brought down his kirpan on her bared neck which, he says, Kusum willingly offered, for "always she made no trouble" (Baldwin 1999, 456).<sup>5</sup>

Faced with Bachan Singh's palpable grief at the memory, Roop listens with sympathy but also with doubt. Her perspective once again prompts, as in the scene of Jeevan's testimony, a critical scrutiny of Bachan Singh's telling. As mentioned above, Baldwin frequently transcribes Roop's muted moments of doubt into the text in italics, the oblique font neatly suggesting how women in the family must surely have looked askance upon the ritualized narrations of the men, which disavowed the fear and pain of the murdered women and replaced them by the mantra of women's valor. Standing in relief, the slanted italics serve to foreground the misgivings with which Roop greets the stories of Jeevan and her father, symbolically filling out the space in the historical record where women's own narrations should be, and suggesting that women's historical silence may not be read simply as consent. When Bachan Singh recounts his decision to perform his "duty" and "sacrifice" Kusum, Roop reflects that "*Revati Bhua was right—Papaji thinks that for good-good women, death should be preferable to dishonour*"—suggesting, of course, that neither she nor Revati Bhua were in agreement with him on that matter (456). Even so, Roop knows that this is the telling that she herself will pass on to Jeevan as well as his sons, who will be told "that their mother went to her death just as she was offered it, baring her neck to Papaji's kirpan, willingly, *Papaji says*, for the izzat of her quom" (456, my italics). But although it is clear that Roop explicitly, and apparently uncritically, recognizes her own role as the bearer of the men's stories, nevertheless, in her brief qualifiers ("*Papaji says*"; and elsewhere, "*Papaji thinks*") is embedded the wealth of doubt that signals Roop's non-agreement with her father (456, italics in original). It is through such

quiet hesitations on the part of the female listener that the patriarchal investments driving the men's narrations are laid bare in the novel.

Roop not only finds suspect her father's stand that Kusum "willingly" bore her neck to the kirpan, but also casts doubt on her father's sanitized narration of the beheading itself. As Kusum prepared for her death, Bachan Singh says, "she turned her back, so I should not see her face, took off her chunni to bare her neck before me. And then . . ." Here he doubles over in grief and tears—a reminder of the affective complexities underlying male self-constructions of victimhood—but then resumes: "I raised my kirpan high above her head. Vaheguru did not stop it; it came down. Her lips still moved, as mine did, murmuring 'Vaheguru, Vaheguru', as her head rolled from my stroke" (456). Now Roop's muted question punctures the narrative: "One stroke? Just one stroke" (456). Roop makes note of the dubious tidiness with which Bachan Singh seems to have succeeded in severing his own daughter-in-law's head from her body.

This scene magnifies and reworks a significant moment of doubt from a matching testimony in Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence*, where the Partition survivor Bir Bahadur Singh gives an eyewitness account of his father's beheading of his sister, Maan Kaur. As Baldwin acknowledges her debt to the testimonial archive collected by Butalia, a brief comparison here may illustrate how the novel reframes and "re-members" the representational strategies evident in Bir Bahadur Singh's telling of his sister's beheading. In his testimony to Butalia, Bir Bahadur Singh relates that after his father had killed two men outside the family at their own behest (to "save" them from conversion), his sister Maan Kaur presented herself for execution. He narrates:

But when my father swung the kirpan (*vaar kita*) . . . perhaps some doubt or fear came into his mind, or *perhaps the kirpan got stuck in her dupatta* . . . no one can say . . . it was such a frightening, such a fearful scene. Then my sister, *with her own hand she removed her plait and pulled it forward* . . . and my father *with his own hands moved her dupatta and then he swung the kirpan and her head and neck rolled off and fell* . . . there . . . far away. I crept downstairs, weeping, sobbing and all the while I could hear the regular swing and hit of the kirpans . . . twenty five girls were killed, they were cut.<sup>6</sup> (Butalia 1998, 180; ellipses in original, italics added)

Unsurprisingly, this traumatic scene comes up again later in Bir Bahadur Singh's testimony, and he gives a second account:

I had two sisters . . . The other one was the first to become a martyr, she did it with such courage. I have not seen anyone else with my own eyes. She sat just like this, on her haunches, and behind her stood my father, while I stood next to him. Father and daughter could not see each other. He was behind her. He sat. He did aardas with his kirpan out. And then, when he tried to kill her, *something came in the way perhaps, or perhaps a father's attachment came in the way.* Then my sister . . . no word was exchanged. *Just the language of the kirpan was enough for the father and daughter to understand each other.* They both were sad that this vaar, this hit went waste. Then my sister caught hold of her plait and moved it aside, and my father hit like this, and her head fell . . . (Butalia 1998, 191–92; ellipses in original, italics added).

Here, arguably, is the raw material for the fictional scene in *What the Body Remembers* where the “compliant” Kusum takes off her chunni to bare her neck before Bachan Singh's kirpan. In Bir Bahadur Singh's testimony, whether the first attempt by his father to kill Maan Kaur failed because of the father's uncertainty or because of a practical detail, indeed, no one can say. Bir Bahadur Singh moves past this moment of uncertainty by assigning agency for the violent act equally to Maan Kaur and his father—she moves the plait “with her own hand”; he moves the dupatta “with his own hands”—this resonates with the moment in the novel where Jeevan suggests that Kusum appeared to have been dismembered “by her own hand” (Butalia 1998, 180; Baldwin 1999, 447). In his second account, the lack of speech in this terrifying moment is produced as a sign of mutual understanding: “Just the language of the kirpan was enough for the father and daughter to understand each other” (Butalia 1998, 192). Despite these denials, Bir Bahadur Singh's testimony nevertheless evokes the sheer messiness of killing one's own kin, not to mention that of dismembering a human body—“something [comes] in the way,” perhaps the kirpan stuck in the dupatta, perhaps a father's attachment. In the novel, this doubt is smoothed over in Bachan Singh's neat narration, but displaced onto the female listener. Read against Bir Bahadur Singh's testimony, the fictional Bachan Singh's testimony reflects the creative, suppressive, and imaginative work narratives must do over time in order to arrive at the beautiful

myths through which the women's deaths are given meaning. Where Bir Bahadur Singh uses the language of attack ("vaar kita") to describe his father's beheading of Maan Kaur, in Bachan Singh's telling he "raises his kirpan"; unlike the "doubt or fear" that impeded the swing of the former's kirpan, in Bachan Singh's narration the task was completed smoothly by divine sanction: "Vaheguru did not stop it; it came down" (Baldwin 1999, 456). There is grief throughout, but no hesitation before, nor regret after. If, on the one hand, Baldwin's rendition of this moment loses the masculine self-doubt that attended to the practice of killing, on the other, it captures precisely the erasures required by the patriarchal "fictioning" of such violence as it is passed on to women and through them down the generations. Bachan Singh's smooth narrative is, however, ruffled in the text by Roop's suggestive remark: "One stroke? Just one stroke."

Once we pick up on the strain of doubt Roop articulates, it becomes possible to see several other questionable turns in the heroic narratives set up by Jeevan and Bachan Singh. For instance, when Bachan Singh tells Roop that at the moment of the beheading, Kusum had turned her face from him, he assumes Kusum did this "so [he] should not see her face," allowing him to carry out his "duty" without being troubled by the sight of her expression. But might we not more credibly infer that the reason why Kusum turns from him was perhaps so that she should not see his face as she goes to her slaughter at his hands? Bachan Singh's failure of imagination on this count is of a piece with his, and Jeevan's, perception of themselves as the main victims of Kusum's death, the father producing himself as a victim of his own obligations, and the son, of the "other" community's machinations. This is why Bachan Singh can freely speak of his own grief, of his "tears mingling with [Kusum's] blood," but never do we hear any mention of her tears, nor any speculation about her grief about a life foreshortened for someone else's honor. We hear only of her unquestioning valor as she went to her death. In both Bachan Singh's and Jeevan's retellings, Kusum's death is now made meaningful by being joined to the long historical archive of martyred Sikh heroes—the archive on which Jeevan, Sardarji, and Roop herself were raised.

Similarly, when Bachan Singh tells Roop what became of his sister Revati Bhua, he holds that she had turned herself over to the mob in the courtyard with "head held high," heroically offering to eat beef and become a Muslim (Baldwin 1999, 457). This mention of beef jars with Bachan Singh's own

earlier observation that “Revati Bhua almost fainted . . . at the word beef” when she had heard the mob’s demand that the family come out and convert to Islam (457). Now Bachan Singh maintains that he “didn’t even realize” when Revati Bhua had left his side and walked down from the terrace to the courtyard, until he saw her talking to the rioters, claiming that she had been left behind by her departed family, and offering to convert. If Roop is instantly incredulous at the thought that Revati Bhua, who “never felt an emotion or took any action unless pre-approved by Papaji” should be so fearless, she is also acutely aware that “Papaji is the teller of Revati Bhua’s tale and he tells it as he wishes it repeated” (458). Roop herself suspects that Revati Bhua might have been under pressure, for despite her father’s assertion of Revati Bhua’s heroism, Roop reflects that “[Papaji] tells her sacrifice as if it is only what he expected of her—that she owed him no less for all the years of hospitality” (458, italics in original). And finally, in the case of Gujri, the old maidservant who had come into the household with Roop’s mother and had been there since, Bachan Singh maintains that she had stopped on the way to India claiming fatigue and refused to budge, so that he was unable to coax her to move on. “Go to your India,” she had said, “[w]hat will this Independence do for a servant woman like me?” (460). Roop’s question, “How could you leave her?” of course goes unasked, yet it lingers in the text as a reminder of the desertion that Bachan Singh is himself unable, and unwilling, to acknowledge (460). In Bachan Singh’s inventory of the Pari Darwaza women who voluntarily, even insistently, give up their own lives, safety, and freedom for the sake of others, what becomes amply evident is the dispensability of the women from whom such sacrifice was clearly expected. While the young and fertile Kusum would have to die, the unmarried Revati Bhua, being beyond her reproductive years, could be allowed to “surrender herself” to the mob, and the working-class Gujri, being neither a blood relative nor from a “respectable” class, could be left behind for the male family members’ convenience. While revealing the sacrifice of these women, the novel also makes expressly clear that of the three, only the sacrifice of the married, respectable, and very dead Kusum can be heroicized without reservation in the familial narrative. Bachan Singh does make it safely to India with his young male charges, Jeevan’s sons, seemingly the only ones among the family at Pari Darwaza who at no point presented Bachan Singh with an inconvenience warranting their “sacrifice” by murder or abandonment.<sup>7</sup>



The novel further underscores Bachan Singh's implication in the violence done to Kusum's body by way of the repeated motif of indeterminable evidence that surfaces in his testimony, comprising a series of clues that point ambivalently toward Bachan Singh's beheading as well as the mob's dismemberment of Kusum. After Kusum's beheading, as her blood "arced, spouted, gushed everywhere," Bachan Singh relates that he had opened the wedding trunks in the room and pulled out clothes, presumably to stem the flow of Kusum's blood (Baldwin 1999, 456). Finally, he had shrouded Kusum with a sheet that he had found in the wedding trunk and run up to the terrace, moments before the Muslim mob battered the door in and crowded into the courtyard of the house. The wedding trunks and the sheet used by Bachan Singh are of course among the same items that Jeevan had observed upon his visit to the deserted house at Pari Darwaza. Their reappearance in Bachan Singh's testimony is significant not only for their ostensible addition of detail to the question of "what happened" at Pari Darwaza, but more so for the symbolic function they perform in the text.

In Jeevan's narration, these objects had numbered among the many signs of disorder he noticed in the unlocked house. Thus, the hastily emptied kitchen with its rolling pots and pans, the open dowry trunks, the gaping hole in the brick wall where his father had kept his money, the missing water bottles of his children from their customary place in the kitchen, and of course, the dismembered body of Kusum covered with the white sheet—these half-clues had all contributed to Jeevan's conclusion that it was either the Muslim mob or else his Hindu uncle Shyam Chacha who had killed and mutilated Kusum and ransacked the house. However, by the end of Bachan Singh's narration it is clear that several of these clues point not to (or not *only* to) the "other" community, but to (or *equally* to) Bachan Singh himself. Thus, it was not the mob who had killed Kusum but Bachan Singh; and while the rampaging rioters had looted Bachan Singh's savings, it was not they who had upturned the wedding trunks, but Bachan Singh himself as he tried to stanch the flow of Kusum's blood. Moreover, the rioters' cutting up of Kusum was only the latter of *two* consecutive rounds of dismemberment enacted upon her body—the first being performed by Bachan Singh himself, whose beheading of his beloved daughter-in-law in fact provided the template for the dismembering violence of the mob. Finally, the white sheet used by the mob to cover Kusum after their dismemberment of her was the same shroud left behind by Bachan

Singh after the beheading. Running across the two men's testimonies, these ambivalent evidentiary signs of violence—the upturned wedding trunks, the body of Kusum “sliced into six parts,” the white shroud— all explicitly connect the differently motivated actions of Bachan Singh with those of Kusum's latter violators (446).

As the focalizing consciousness in the testimony scenes, Roop models an attitude of skeptical listening to the gendered tellings of men with regard to violence against their own kinswomen. In questioning (and inviting the reader to question) Bachan Singh's account of the lost women of Pari Darwaza, the figure of Roop restores to the narration the violence that had previously been expunged by Bachan Singh's repeated assertions of the women's willingness and his own helplessness in their fate. But, most crucially perhaps, Roop directs the reader's attention back to the body of Kusum as it appears and disappears in the narrations of the men. At the end of his telling, Jeevan, still unaware of Bachan Singh's version of events, requests Roop not to repeat his account to their father: “Let him remember Pari Darwaza the way it was as long as he can” (Baldwin 1999, 451). Silently accepting this charge, Roop, however, realizes that *she* must not forget. “I must remember Kusum's body,” Roop decides, and the narrative voice confirms: “Roop will remember Kusum's body, re-membered” (451). As Priya Kumar observes of this moment in the novel, “The incantatory effect of the repeated phrase ‘I must remember’ highlights the crucial importance of a feminist mode of cultural recall in defamiliarizing and rendering uncanny our sanctioned group memories and national mythologies” (Kumar 2008, 120). But what *does* this woman's dismembered, disemboweled, re-patched body remember?

## What the Body Remembers

In her analysis of the discourse of war, Scarry observes that one of the many representational paths by which the practice of injuring (which she insists is the central purpose of war rather than its “by-product”) disappears from view is that of “redescription.” According to Scarry: “Redescription may . . . be understood as only a more active form of omission: rather than leaving out the fact of bodily damage, that fact is itself included and actively cancelled out as it is introduced into the spoken sentence or begins to be recorded on a written page” (Scarry 1985, 69). In *What the Body*

Remembers, this kind of redescription is plainly evident in the testimonies of Jeevan and Bachan Singh, wherein the violated body of Kusum is meticulously registered, its injuries clearly documented and yet undermined or “cancelled out” by the men’s insistence on treating this body primarily as a missive between communities. Thus Jeevan can detail the injuries on Kusum’s body while parsing them only for the “message,” and Bachan Singh can describe the blood arcing out of Kusum’s beheaded body while still representing it as necessary. The embodied reality of the injury itself disappears at the very moment of its invocation in narrative. In the text, this narrative trait is figured as men’s ability to look at women “from the corner of each eye,” without seeing them (Baldwin 1999, 43).

Like Scarry, Baldwin too wishes to reverse the nullifying effect of such redescriptions, by foregrounding the injured body at the site of violence via Roop’s injunction to “remember Kusum’s body, re-membered” (Baldwin 1999, 451). Yet the text seems to acknowledge the impossibility of restoring this body to view in any unmediated way: this perhaps explains why the text disallows the reader from ever “looking” directly upon the injured body. Kusum’s mutilated corpse becomes visible to the reader only at a remove, filtered through the perspectives of Jeevan and Bachan Singh. Mediated through the questionable narrations of the two men, this mutilated body in fact appears once more as an *image*, somewhat fuzzy, and not entirely distinct in its contours. This refracted image of the dead woman’s re-membered body figures most evocatively the manner in which patriarchal narratives about such killings have tended to vaporize the materiality of the murdered women’s bodies into pure image. It dramatizes what theater scholar Diana Taylor (drawing on the Argentine psychoanalyst Juan Carlos Kusnetzoff) calls “percepticide”—the rhetorical disappearing act by which “violence against women disappears and reappears as pure metaphor” (Taylor 1997, 10).<sup>8</sup> If the men in the family look at the body without seeing, the text challenges the reader to look and see the materiality of the body’s injuries without lingering voyeuristically over its graphic form.

The image of Kusum’s dismembered, re-membered body itself appears in the text as a palimpsest projected by male perspectives, and produced by two intersecting vectors of violence, within and between family and community. Its “re-membering” after dissection allegorizes the author’s exhortation to remember this body differently, as well as the convergence between the two kinds of dismembering violence Kusum suffered. The

patched-up body co-implicates Bachan Singh and the mob in her mutilation. Put back together, Kusum's severed head now merges as one of the six dismembered parts, so that they appear as the evidence of one and the same act of violence. The concentration of both kinds of violence onto the same symbolic site (Kusum's body) compellingly figures what Menon and Bhasin describe as "a continuum of violence that had death at the hands of one's own kinsmen at one end, and rape and brutalisation by men of the other community at the other" (Menon and Bhasin 1998, 57). In the novel, this body accordingly describes "a powerful consensus around the subject of violence against women" that cuts across competing communal patriarchies (57).

## Conclusion

*What the Body Remembers* foregrounds the many ways in which gendered bodies serve not merely as sites or "grounds" of inscription for violence, as feminist scholars of violence and war have so often observed, but also as living archives that house the memory of violence. Equally important, the novel suggests how a feminist literary narration may expose and counter the representational violations of patriarchal memory. Revealing how such memory enacts a kind of textual violence on women's injured bodies, the novel attempts to produce a mode of memory that remembers these embodied injuries differently: partly by returning us to the elided fact of bodily sentience, hinted at in Roop's thankful reflection that "her own neck is spared the long blade of a sharpened kirpan" (Baldwin 1999, 457). It is through Roop's privileged re-membering that the novel unearths the material body of the dead Kusum overwritten by the palimpsestic narrations of her male family members. In returning us to the body—that is, to the fact of its materiality rather than attempting any simple recovery thereof—the novel attempts to wrest the woman's injured body from its deployment as pure signifier.

Of course, the disappearance of women's bodies into metaphor is not simply a consequence of embodied violence but its condition of possibility as well. Reading the moment in the novel where Jeevan sees and decodes Kusum's mutilated body, J. Edward Mallot notes rightly that part of the "message" left by Kusum's attackers includes "the cruelly obvious body-as-subcontinent metaphor" (Mallot 2006, 173). Here it is somewhat difficult

to determine whether the use of Kusum's body as a metaphor for the partitioned subcontinent can be attributed to the mob in the text or to Baldwin herself. Certainly the novel's discourse occasionally seems to risk succumbing to the tropological temptations of woman's body as a culturally available metaphor, even as elsewhere it critiques the violent symbology of woman as *izzat* (honor).<sup>9</sup> For instance, the text more than once introduces the metaphor of India as a raped woman's body—a figure that reinscribes the synonymous association between women's bodies and the nation, which in turn renders real women vulnerable to rape in times of war. In one instance, Roop, witnessing the scene of human devastation around her on her way to India, reflects that “[India] is like a woman raped so many times she has lost count of all trespassers across her body”; at another point, Roop reflects on British judgments of Partition violence as evincing the savagery of Indians: “Nowhere in their editorials will they acknowledge their own rape and plunder of India” (Baldwin 1999, 425, 437; emphasis in original). By embedding the trope in Roop's consciousness, the text produces an interesting indeterminacy regarding the authorship of the trope. On the one hand, the trope reminds us of the patriarchal and communal thinking to which Roop, no unambiguous feminist, frequently succumbs in the novel. On the other hand, both moments above present Roop in a mode of critical oppositional consciousness, as she critiques the depravity of communal and colonial violence via the rape metaphor, and the reader is drawn into identification with her thoughts. Equally, the indeterminacy presses home the fact that secular anticolonial discourse too has always been as reliant on patriarchal discourse and its symbology as colonial and communalist discourses.

I would argue in conclusion that the mutilated body of Kusum may itself be read as a trope for the violence of using women's bodies as mere tropes. Kusum's dismembered body allegorizes most pointedly the violent effects of the prior troping of women's bodies in the discourses of patriarchy—a trope for nation, a trope for community, a trope for male honor. After all, it is the prior troping of woman as community and nation that makes the woman's dissected body meaningful as a trope for Partition; the prior troping of woman as male honor that makes rape and reproductive violence against women intelligible as an act of emasculating violence against men, and which makes her death preferable to such “dishonor.” Indeed, what the dismembered body in Baldwin's novel prompts us to see

is how woman is all too often pre-figured in the sinister scripts of patriarchal representation, symbolically and literally, as dead metaphor.

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#### NOTES

1. For an evocative description of this scene of mass suicide in the televised *Tamas*, see Mankekar 1999, 310–11. It may also be worth noting that it is this bloodless scene of women's sacrifice by drowning that lends itself to such mythical representation on the television screen—rather than the bloody scene of beheading that the Partition survivor Bir Bahadur Singh recounts to Urvashi Butalia, and which Shauna Singh Baldwin chooses to represent in *What the Body Remembers* (Baldwin 1999).
2. Baldwin, a Canadian writer of South Asian descent, published the novel on the heels of and in conversation with the historiographical work mentioned above. The novel was well received by reviewers in North America as well as South Asia, both for its literary merits and its focus on the experience of minority women in the decades leading up to Partition, yet it has received relatively little sustained critical attention from literary scholars. Priya Kumar considers the novel briefly in her book *Limiting Secularism*, focusing more centrally on “Family Ties,” a short story by Baldwin preoccupied with similar themes (Kumar 2008). J. Edward Mallot's article, “Body Politics and the Body Politic,” is one exception, and focuses on the novel's construction of bodily injuries as offering a non-verbal path to testimony. Mallot focuses on several moments in the text—such as women's mourning rituals that include self-lacerations of the body, or Roop's displacement of grief about her mother's death into pain by receiving a tattoo on her wrist—to suggest how female characters in these instances “use the body to create alternate narratives of pain and perseverance” (Mallot 2006, 172). The present article, on the other hand, focuses more centrally on the text's dramatization of how, in patriarchal rememberings, embodied injuries are stripped of violence, and thereby denied the chance to testify to their own suffering.
3. Since Baldwin's novel is based partly on extensive interviews with Partition survivors in Pakistan as well as with former British colonizers, Didur's reminder is as pertinent to Baldwin's novel as it is for fiction contemporaneous to the moment of Partition. Didur herself takes the term “literariness” from

- Paul de Man, citing his argument that “[w]henver [the] autonomous potential of language can be revealed by analysis, we are dealing with literariness and, in fact, with literature as the place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available” (quoted in Didur 2006, 43).
4. I take the phrase “martyrological consciousness” from anthropologist Cynthia Keppley-Mahmood, who makes a similar point with regard to the representational apparatus around Sikh militants in the 1980s movement for a separate state of Khalistan (Keppley-Mahmood 2002, 126). The political imperatives and representational effects of the latter are, of course, necessarily different from those prevalent at Partition, but the imagery of martyred bodies was influential in both contexts.
  5. This revelation also recalls Jeevan’s earlier question: “[w]hy were her legs not bloody?”; we realize that Kusum’s body, being first beheaded, might have been leached of its blood prior to its discovery by the mob. The text perhaps hints that Jeevan has guessed that Kusum was already dead at the time of her dismemberment—this may be why Jeevan concludes that she had been “cut ... apart without first raping.” (447) I am thankful to Robert Buffington for suggesting this possibility, which opens up a range of readings I do not have space to pursue here.
  6. Bir Bahadur Singh also narrates two other incidents of men asking his father to kill them rather than allowing their “Sikhi to get stained”—but in his narration, the men ask his father to take their lives, whereas in the women’s case, the decision was made for them (Butalia 1998, 179). Butalia also reflects upon the case of women who were aware of and involved in the decisions to “choose” death over dishonor, but in light of the lack of other options and the possibility of male protection, Butalia rightly asks: “Where in their decision did ‘choice’ begin and ‘coercion’ end? What, in other words, does their silence hide?” (169).
  7. It should be said that children, boys and girls, were in fact frequently “sacrificed” along with women, as the many survivors speaking in Butalia’s book have testified. In the novel, however, Bachan Singh’s commitment to rescuing his grandchildren is explicitly because they were the precious male heirs who would carry the line forward. Baldwin also acknowledges the difficulty of judging historical others in a time when almost everyone came to be implicated in some betrayal to save oneself: as Roop reflects, “Each of us has betrayed something, someone, or a part of ourselves” (Baldwin 1999, 460).
  8. While both Taylor and Kusnetzoff use the term to represent the Argentine military’s “attack on the perceptual organs of population” during Argentina’s state-sponsored “Dirty War,” the term may also be adapted to contexts where the attack on perception is effected by less apparently hostile subjects on more apparently agreeable objects (Taylor 1997, 268).
  9. Elsewhere I have observed how an author’s deconstruction of a particular kind of national allegory—for example, Rushdie’s deconstruction of Indira Gandhi’s auto-allegory (“Indira is India”) in *Midnight’s Children*—need not

preclude his or her own use of women's bodies as national allegories, albeit in a different mode. See Misri 2009.

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