
A Psychoanalytical Approach of Body Memory in Asian Literature

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Abstract: This paper investigates the concept of body memory treated in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*. It deals not only with revealing the potential methods of remembering, but also how victims resort to alternative modes of memory and recovery. The late twentieth century has witnessed an increased emphasis on questions of memory as the generations which experienced the atrocities of the two world wars die out, and new or revived national movements build their demands on memories of oppression or trauma. Adopting a non-verbal source of inquiry, Shauna Singh Baldwin questions the unchallenged supremacy of the verbal testimony as a means for healing the self, emphasizing how South Asian Literary Texts themselves point toward non-textual sites of memory such as human body. Baldwin explores the dark tunnels of memory in which the revelation of the past occurs brilliantly through new generatively trans-textual intersections of memory, nationalism and narrative Scars, tattoos, post-memory, and reincarnation are among the new modes presented by this Indian author. In this vein, I claim that the text comes out to suggest new ways in which human body can preserve and displays individual and collective memory. I shall also discuss the extent to which the female body potentially facilitate the act of remembering denying the importance of the language structure.

Keywords: Memory, Body Memory, Individual & Collective Trauma

1. Introduction

Memory has the potential to generate an ephemeral return to a lost past, its function also constitutes the sophisticated relationship between past, present and future in human consciousness. The intense focus on memory in a wide range of disciplines towards the end of the nineteenth century was "part of the secular drive to replace the soul with something of which we have knowledge [1]." The advent of such theoretical perception on the notion of memory originates from psychological critical works.

The late twentieth century has also witnessed an increased emphasis on questions of memory as the generations which experienced the atrocities of the two world wars die out, and new or revived national movements build their demands on memories of oppression or trauma. The wide interest on the role and function of memory may further highlight a renewed willing to make safe of self in the wake of postmodern theories of human subject concern.

What seems more striking is that there are other critical

modes of remembering and disclosure. In this vein, I claim that Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*, a novel about a dramatic event occurred in August 1947 overlapped with the Indian's independence from Britain (Partition), comes out to suggest new ways in which human the body can preserve and displays individual and collective memory. Baldwin explores the dark tunnels of memory in which the revelation of the past occurs brilliantly through non-verbal means. Scars, tattoos, post-memory, and reincarnation are among the new modes presented by this Indian author.

2. Body as a Means of Remembering

In the process of remembering, some theorists believe in the fact that language is the only medium for the real revelation of the historical past, but some Holocaust survivors, as James Young describes, tend to describe the traumatic past without the inevitable mediation of language. They undertake the body as a sole mean to make sense of the

past. James Young argues that “their impossible task is ...to show somehow that their words are material traces of experiences, that the current existence of their narrative is causal proof that its objects also existed in historical time [2]”.

Edward Casey identifies the body as a “memorial container”, holding memories of joy or pain which can be relived or re-experienced involuntarily [3]. Thus, according to Edward Casey the body is precisely embodied memory, in that it is constitutive of our experience of living in time. He further states that there is no memory without the interference of the human body. In this context, body memory can work as an alternative vision of storing memories. These memories, of course, are at most of times characterized with phantom pain in a certain part of the body. Thus, body memory is considered to be the epitome of retaining and recovering repressed memories; and this occurs through corporal sensations.

In *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, Edward Casey’s theory of body memory provides us with the tools to understand, analyze and interpret the data. Casey distinguishes between three different kinds of body memories: habitual, erotic and traumatic. The first type of body memory which is habitual, has to deal with the capability of the body to record our skills; for instance, standing and walking are easy for us without having to learn them every time from the start. The second type which is erotic body is associated with things related to experiences of pleasure. The pleasure of dancing is quite obvious in strengthening our erotic body memory all over again. And finally, the traumatic body memory which has to deal with horrible and painful experiences. One teacher describes her experience of a situation in which the dance student’s body is blocked and learning is strongly linked to the student’s earlier body memories making learning almost impossible. Such dancing situation stands as a strong proof which reveals deep insight on the ability for the body to store and retain memories [3]. In *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body*, Paul Connerton scrutinizes the way memory of traumatic events are inscribed within human bodies. He does also tackle social and cultural memory by the examination of the role of lamenting in the production of histories and reservation of silence across many different cultures. Connerton precisely deals with the question of the way memories are communicated in gesture, bodily posture, speech and the senses_ and how bodily memory becomes marked in cultural objects such as tattoos, letters, buildings and public spaces. It might be argued that what is conventionally called cultural memory is originated from bodily practices and postures as by documents and texts.

Body memory has emerged as an umbrella term to describe the alternative way in which societies depend on to remember their past. This kind of memory maintains the experienced event and serves as a background for evaluating present experiences. The body itself is viewed as an archaeological site which retains the experiences of the past. This seems to be much more apparent from Freud’s

hysterical patients whose bodily symptoms revealed that they were suffering from reminiscences. In an interview on the question of the use of body memory in narrative, Shauna Singh Baldwin says:

The idea of body memory and collective memory naturally follows beliefs in mind-body connection, and oneness... (In psychotherapy, Jung’s theories of collective memory and the shadow side of human nature repackaged and gave scientific gloss to Sufi and Hindu ideas that had been around for centuries, but Jung’s work has been less popular than Freud’s in the USA. Some Western thinkers are making the journey back to integrating the mind and body in Western thinking [4].

The brilliance of Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *What the Body Remembers* lies in the way in which it provides twentieth century audiences access to history through a non-verbal site of memory. In his thought provoking book entitled *History and Memory after the Auschwitz*, Dominick LaCapra draws attention to the difficulties in finding means to adequately express “limit-events” such as the Holocaust or in this case, Partition. There is no doubt that this suggests the failure of language in its effort to sufficiently recover the experience of the past. Given these complexities, Baldwin successfully articulates a compelling vision of alternative bodily methods to witness the atrocities of the historical past.

3. The Limits of Language

“Body memories” is a concept found, for instance in the eschatology of Sikhism, in the ideas of psychology such as Carl Jung’s “archetypes”, or Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s “Trans-generational phantoms [5]”, and it does also exist in the refutation of Cartesian dualism by scientists such as Antonio Damasio. Such physical recollections form a principle subject of discourse in psychological, scientific and even religious theory. It is quite familiar that Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism believe in re-incarnation. It means that there is a belief that when the body dies, the soul is viewed as persistent and immortal. This suggests that the ethics of the dead person’s past actions (Karma) are the means which determine the future destination of a person’s soul (atma):

The Indian sages conceived of life, within both the micro- and macro-cosmic spheres, not as a steady state but as a process, a continual and protracted (if not interminable) flow of life-powers, a perpetual fluctuation of forces or coursing of energies through channels that pervade the body of the universe and the bodies of all the creatures who inhabit it. [6]

Nevertheless, the transmission of a person’s actions either it be talents, powers or virtues does not only occur from a person’s current existence to a future life, but also between family members. This idea of the transmission of merit, makes the possibility of actions (Karma) flowing between relatives, living and dead. Either it is praiseworthy or not, an individual’s actions create what is called “Karmic Residues” (karmasaya). These residues emerged with dispositional

tendencies (Samskara) which has the ability to recreate memories of the acts that produced the residue when activated. They might not be reanimated until a future existence however; they can be triggered within the originator's life time.

Such eschatology of Eastern religions can be easily located within the framework of a group body of modern Western psychotherapy and philosophy of science. Jung seems to be inspired by religious concepts such as Karma, Karmasaya, and Samskara. This is clearly evident in his delineation of collective consciousness, ancestral heritage and archetypes. It is easy to see connections between Jung's description of archetypes (as those dreams, vision and delusions) that affect our instinctual behaviour and ideas that are deep-rooted in Eastern philosophical traditions. In other words, his description of archetypes seems to echo the concept of Karmasaya, and their power as well as their influence is reminiscent with the reactivation of Samskara.

The process of bodily remembering is not only confined to re-incarnation, but it can also appear in the form of mourning. By beating and tearing their bodies, women tend to displace emotional pain onto their bodies into permanent testimonies of loss: "the representation of grief is that it is metonymically experienced as bodily pain and the female body as one that will carry this pain within forever. A mimesis is certainly established between body and language [7]." In this way, the trauma of communal violence seems to be inscribed in the female body which can be considered as a meaningful text to depend on in the aftermath of Partition.

Furthermore, Western scholars discuss also another part of the process of sharing memories collectively which comes from the passing down of those narratives to others, especially to the coming generations. It has to deal with "postmemory", a term which is used by Marianne Hirsch to suggest how knowledge of the past can be passed on to descendants of victims of limit-events and how brutalities may be relived vicariously. Accordingly, Marianne Hirsch states that "postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that precede their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right [8]." She thinks that this "postmemory" is distinct and has a special importance for traumatic memory:

Postmemory is defined through identification with the victim or witness of trauma, modulated by an admission of an unbridgeable distance separating the participant from the one born after... Postmemory thus would be retrospective witnessing by adoption. It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences _ and thus also the memories _ of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and thus of inscribing them into one's own life story [9].

Despite the fact that family is viewed as a privilege site of memory transmission, Hirsch sees that "postmemory need not be strictly an identity position [9]." However, she draws attention to the female character of this transference since it

occurs especially between mothers and daughters. One might argue that "postmemory" can have both advantages and drawbacks. Its positive effect has to do with the importance it provides in bonding a group of individuals better together. Besides, it has a significant weight in preserving a familial sense of history and each member's place in it. On the other hand, postmemory can bring about terrific suffering to the future generations because of the re-inscription of the traumatic experience. In this respect, Hirsch argues:

For postmemorial artists, the challenge is to define an aesthetic based on a form of identification and projection that can include the transmission of the bodily memory of trauma without leading to the self-wounding and retraumatization that is rememory. The desire for this type of non-appropriative identification and empathy and, of course, it's often painful and disastrous flaws and failures has formed the core of feminist theory and practice in the last thirty years [9].

This "self-wounding" does not only raises a great deal of questions about the limits of remembering or memory practices (memorials, rituals of commemoration, literature of memory and so forth) but also about the purpose behind these practices. The challenge of the literature which tackles the question of memory lies in its endeavour to look at the past in a way that makes the present reanimated, rather than rendering those who remember to the realm of trauma and further loss. In writing *What the Body Remembers*, Shauna Singh Baldwin confronts such this challenge, in many cases, and also her characters: how to maintain memory in body and narrative, how to transmit that knowledge and how to avoid creating trauma in doing this transmission.

4. Body as a Proactive Text

In Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers*, Roop, a young Sikh woman is the protagonist. Her mother dies early in the novel. Her father attempts to afford money for a living and supply a dowry for both his daughters. When Roop, the younger daughter feels that her family's fortunes become deteriorated, she persuades her father to give her the permission to become the second wife of childless Sardarji. After marriage, Roop is treated with an extreme contempt by Sardarji's first wife, Satya. She takes custody of Roop's children immediately after their births. But she frequently recognizes that Roop is more admired by Sardarji. Satya could not bear seeing her marriage crumbling, and she decides to infect herself with tuberculosis. After the death of Satya, Roop feels that she must help her family flee to Delhi as the Partition looms. The novel closes with the beginning of a new phase in Roop's marriage and the re-incarnation of Satya.

What the Body Remembers deals with body memory in a numerous ways. Baldwin's characters take the initiative to transform their bodies into proactive texts. They use their bodies to register pain. In this novel, the body becomes the canvas onto which past events can be inscribed. This seems to give them the opportunity to express their subversiveness

and indictment. In order to suggest alternative narratives, the female body becomes an ultimate source of catalysing pain and perseverance. One of the most exemplified aspects of using the body in Baldwin's novel is during the death of Roop's mother when female relatives and friends, as Das suggested above, hold a mourning ritual: "They beat their breasts, rocking, crying, lamenting with one voice...they cry from their wombs, they pant and howl out all the pain in this life and their past ones, they give tongue to the silent sorrow of men too manly to cry [10]."

Basing on what is said above about the body's inscription which reflects pain, Roop, in her turn, decides to mark the death of her mother by puncturing her arm. In this process of tattooing, she feels a sort of a simultaneous pain and release. In the novel, Baldwin says that "Skin turns to canvas. Ink spreads across the vulnerable softness of her inner wrist, giving shape to the sound of her name. There is pain now in Roop's wrist, pain that has cause, cause she can see. The pain of her heart is invisible; no one cries for that kind of pain [10]." Basing on the fact that Roop's name means the body, it signifies her sense of physical and psychological selves, as Roop substitutes her agony into a pain both visible and more manageable. Roop seems to project the idea which seeks to acknowledge that healing necessitates the recognition of the one's self.

The female body seems to be a particular point of focus in Baldwin's novel. This importance given to the body of woman in the narrative suggests purity. Because of communal violence before and after Partition, honour seems not to be maintained easily. Hence, families resort to drastic measures for preserving dignity. This is apparent from the shocking scene of Kusum's corpse in *What the Body Remembers*. Kusum is Roop's sister-in-law who is a victim of Partition rioting: "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 [10]." Roop takes a firm promise to remember Kusum's body. She says "I must remember Kusum's body...remembered [10]." Yet, lately Roop discovers that what happened to her sister-in-law is not committed by enemies; rather, it is Papajji who kills her after an agreement with Kusum herself. Papajji decapitates Kusum who decides stoically to sacrifice for saving the family honour.

In a state of a great confusion and ambiguity, Roop wonders: "why does a woman choose to die? A shadow woman whispers in Roop's ear, "Sometimes we choose to die because it is the only way to be both heard and seen, little sister [10]" I think that this statement constitutes the significant meaning of the novel as a whole. It is true that through death, women bodies become ultimately meaningful. They become meaningful due to their effective potential to uncover the truth of the past events. It is in this sense that Roop takes the responsibility to remember the brutal demise of Kusum, because this element of Roop's family cannot be forgotten. In the novel, Roop is portrayed as becoming the living epitome of Kusum's memory: "Jeevan continues and his story enters Roop's body. This telling is not for Roop, this

telling is for Roop to tell sons, and her sons [10]" So, it is clear that Roop's memory is par excellence the source of the significant insight for the future generation. This is certainly what might be highlighted beyond the claims of postmemory discussed above.

Notwithstanding Satya's humiliation and bad treatment, Roop becomes also the conduit for the knowledge and experience of her co-wife. Accordingly Baldwin writes: "but because Roop felt that one, single moment, that single solitary empathetic moment, Satya will live on in Roop...Roop will be Satya's vessel, bearing Satya's anger, pride and ambition forward from this minute. Like the Gurus, they might be one spirit, different bodies [10]." This quote exemplifies the process of the re-incarnation that I have mentioned previously. It has to deal with the disclosure of Satya's possession of Roop.

Obviously, it is exactly the transference of karmic residues to Roop. What is more, the formulation of archetypes as deposits of the constantly repeated experiences of humanity is equally applicable as Roop inherits Satya's wisdom [11]. Roop seems to be influenced by Satya's actions that are much more useful at pertinent moments, for instance while she flee from Pakistan to Delhi, she is urged to lie about her religious background. This action is clearly originated from the spirit of Satya: "comes a thought from the fringe of awareness as if some other woman spoke from the wings, shaped the thoughts that speed across the theatre of Roop's mind: *Surrender is not the only option*. And then another. *Some men are not entitled to the truth [11]*." The strength which allows Roop to defend her children and to challenge Pakistani soldiers is undoubtedly drawn from Satya's personality. Even if she is a former enemy for Roop, Satya is viewed as a role model. Therefore, Roop takes advantage of Satya's pride and defiance to help her accomplish her purpose during the turmoil event of Partition.

5. Conclusion

By way of synthesizing, the novel is a typical text which calls forth new ways to recognize the nature of and reactions to trauma in multiple, particularly non western constructs. The human body becomes a powerful site through which the past is processed. Mourning, tattooing, reincarnation and postmemory shape a wide discourse that concerns trauma and historiography during the Indian Partition. In this way, the female body serves as a catachrestic discourse which offers the voice to the subaltern to be heard, irrespective of what speech is meant to mean. The process of tattooing and scars represent the self recognition which eventually leads to a healing point.

The female body is as a unique and intentional means of remembering the atrocities of the historical past. It is a desire to embody and enact this corpo-reality that underscores the text revolution against oppositional thinking, rhetoric and social codes of language. So, in *What the Body Remembers* as the title suggests, the body is privileged and constantly gives upon language. I believe that the fusion of the

alternative method of memory and recovery (body memory) with the verbal traits is also rewarding.

The text is a cultural archaeology that acknowledges the importance of reliving the non-western tradition in dealing with the issue of remembering a denied event of Indian Partition. The national amnesia is challenged to generate therapeutic importance of recognizing the self and reconciling the past with the present for reaching a just future. *What the Body Remembers* creates new histories which enrich, subvert and pre-empt formal closure for the narratives of history which determine the identities of nations.

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