

# *Dossier of the Muses*

International Journal of Literary Studies of  
Govt. College for Women M. A. Road Srinagar

## ***What the Body Remembers: Material Memory and the Social Construction of Space***

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* within the context of material memory and its ability to act as a stimulus for recollection, revealing personal and collective histories of the Partition of the Indian subcontinent. Given the recent 'spatial turn' in social sciences and humanities, the paper allows us to understand how during Partition, different spaces acted as social constructs, sites where Partition migrants and refugees enacted and negotiated their identities. Through a close examination of places and spaces the novel opens up to, the paper explores how these spaces were socially manipulated as a kind of changeable material that is produced as much as it produces.

Aanchal Malhotra in her seminal work *Remnants of a Separation : A History of the Partition through Material Memory* notes that the movement of population during the Partition of the Indian subcontinent was accompanied by a movement of memories and possessions, sometimes those about which the affected people were unable and unwilling to speak (xxv). The importance of what she terms material memory lies in the ability of an object or possession to retain memory and act as a stimulus for recollection.

Shauna Singh's novel *What the Body Remembers* is set against the backdrop of India's Partition. As the subcontinent witnesses the brutal drama of Partition in 1947, Sardarji and his wife Roop have to leave Pakistan and struggle to find a safe place for themselves in the new nation state, India. There are several material possessions and objects that are

carried by Roop and Sardarji in the novel. As madness and fury enveloped, people had to decide whether to carry the most valuable or the most important things. For Sardarji, it is difficult to conjecture if he will return to Pakistan, post Partition. He, therefore, decides to carry all the maps of Punjab from the Irrigation Department Library folded into the bedding roll. Maps are possessions he has relied on every day, inaccurate and inexact as they may have been. He plans to use them when he is reassigned to the Indian West Punjab Irrigation Department office. Amidst the chaos of Partition, Sardarji seeks some sort of order by drawing lines on the map of Punjab clearly demarcating Sikh shrines, mosques, temples, headworks, dams, and power stations. As J. Edward Mallot says, maps offer Sardarji's counter history, an alternative rhetoric of peaceful co-existence. They enable him to find pathways into exploring and rediscovering the past (203-4). It is through his maps and files that he can lay claims on the city of Lahore. Another object that he carries with him is the bunch of keys to the Rawalpindi haveli. I quote from the text, "Keys to every lock he ever had and never used to the trunks in the underground godowns, keys to each suite of rooms, keys for sideboards and Chinese cabinets... keys to trunks full of books, keys to every gate and stable, so many unused keys" (395-96). These are objects that Aanchal Malhotra sees as carrying a suffocated sense of the past (43). The keys have absorbed memories of Sardarji's lifestyle in the haveli. They serve as testaments to the struggles and sacrifices he and Satya had made. Material memory in this way reveals personal and collective histories.

Roop carries her mother's sapphire ring and all the jewellery Sardarji brought his wives from his travels over the years. The first gifts Sardarji gave her, the gold kantha necklace, the three-tiered ruby earrings, Satya's omega watch ... all that had been passed from Satya to Roop. These objects remind Roop of Satya's body, barren, but still useful (6). They are reminders of Satya's death which was not a useless, meaningless one like Satya's brother but death for a reason. Jewellery, in this sense, suffocates time and space, holding the weight of old undiscovered secrets (Malhotra

47). Roop also takes with her the Guru Granth Sahib and her mother's phulkari embroidered shawl, both of which she needs for strength. The physicality of the mother's shawl and the sapphire ring preserve and invoke memories of the mother, evidence of age and markers of the passing of time. A material inscription on Roop's body is the tattoo on her wrist. It's a tattoo that had given her a pain with a cause as she had marked her mother's death with the tattoo. It's silent evidence of her past in Pari Darwaza, her awareness of one's freedom of thinking and acting. The tattoo in Urdu script does prove useful as she displays it to her possible attackers, a bargain to save her and Jorimon's life. Another material possession that lays claim to a historic past is the American-made black Packard Sedan car that carries Roop and the children to Delhi via the Grand Trunk Road. The car bears witness to the violence and the claims that Muslims make on Sardarji's haveli in Rawalpindi, his mill, "his orchards and every village his family has down seven generations (378)". The black Packard will take them to India, an empty name with no history, a name shorn of meaning for both Roop and Sardarji. It's an object that stands as a testimony to the cries and moans of loss and anger, the expressionless silences of the mass of humanity it passes through (391). When the mass of Muslim men attacks Roop and Jorimon, the Packard serves as a site of shared fear that the Sikh refugee and the Muslim woman experience. In *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects. Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions*, Muruska Svasek discusses the different processes at play when people and things cross geographical, social, and cultural boundaries as they move through time and space. She employs the terms transit, transition, and transformation to investigate the emotional dimensions of subject and object mobility.

Since the mid-1970s, greater attention than before has been given to space that led to what has been summarized as the 'spatial turn' in the social sciences and humanities. The following discussion examines some spaces in the text where Sardarji and Roop, as refugees, negotiate their old, pre-Partition identities through varied spatial practices.

Baldwin writes about the Grand Trunk Road in the novel, “In all the centuries since it was first carnated in cobbled stone to carry the armies of Alexander the Great and Sher Shah, then Mughal, then Sikh armies, the two lanes of the Grand Trunk Road have never felt the press of so many sorrowing men and women as this day” (389-90). Since the Aryan invasion of the subcontinent, 3500 years ago, the route has served as a corridor for the movement of goods, armies and travellers. It was a part of Silk route for centuries. Due to frequent travel of traders, manufacturers and merchants on the route, the road played a key role in the dissemination of knowledge and exchange of commodities. Ironically, during the Partition, it served as a site where women were exchanged between men as commodities, as bearers of national and communal honour. The road bears witness to the bloodshed, to the lives lost during the catastrophe. The Grand Trunk Road becomes a layered space that gets negotiated by men of different religion. It is one of those spaces that Edward Soja defines as “socially manipulated, changeable material that is produced as much as it produces and involves social translation, transformation, and experience (Chambers 16). Sardarji’s 'Pindi haveli and the Lahore Club Road Bungalow are also spaces that get negotiated during the Partition riots.

“The 'Pindi Haveli is where his father and mother lived and died; the memory of that haveli sustained him all the lonely days in England. He has more right to that haveli and that jagir than many in his clan... He holds that haveli in trust for his sons and for future generations of his clan” (378).

It is a space, as the Club Road Bungalow is, that insists on the paradoxical position of the Sikhs, lying between the Hindus on one side and the Muslims on another. From being a space where Satya learnt the art of re-membering and knowing, it transforms into a space upon which the dislocation of Sikhism is enacted. These are sites where Sardarji reads *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, builds canals and networks

through the state of Punjab, makes drafts and plans for a modern India. These places are what Clarie Chambers thinks of as social constructs or states of consciousness, that refuse to be contained within pre-given frameworks of thoughts (7). In an essay on Lahore, Chambers notes,

“Lahore has been Pakistan’s social and cultural heartland, its landmarks provide architectural testament to the many parts which have overlaid the city, making it a palimpsest and the space of intersecting identities” (7).

Roop and Sardarji take walks through Gymkhana Club, Lawrence Gardens, Cosmopolitan Club in Lahore, witnessing its ancient and culturally loaded history. While in Rawalpindi, Sardarji goes for walks through Rajah Bazaar. The bazaar is the place that gives him ideas. It is where connections come to him between old and new. He goes to the bazaar when he needs its “smell and its timelessness” (271). As Roop and Sardarji walk, they reshape these physical spaces, give new meanings to places and streets, thereby creating their own stories. I place this ritual of walking in the novel within the context of Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In the chapter ‘Walking in the City’, Certeau asserts that it is specifically the walking people who bring the city to life. They use and transform space. With thousands of individuals each writing his own story and giving his own interpretation, the city is pieced together something like a patchwork quilt of individual viewpoints and opinions. Certeau argues that walking in the city has its own rhetoric and people write their own course of subjective use of the space as they walk about. The walker gives new meanings to places and streets which are not the same as those originally assigned to them. I wish to elaborate more on walking by contextualizing it with the figure of Benjamin’s flaneur and Georg Simmel’s views on the individual’s position in the big city that he proposes in *The Metropolis and Mental Life*.

The Faletti’s hotel too is a multifaceted space that unites members of different religious groups as they discuss current events and developments at the Tuesday Lunch Club. Established in 1880 during the colonial era,

Faletti's is one of the oldest buildings in Lahore. It boasts of Victorian design and guests like M.A. Jinnah, Pandit Nehru, Lord and Lady Mountbatten. It too is a layered space that evokes rich memories of the sub-continent's shared history. As Sardarji bids goodbye to Roop and the children at Faletti's, he is dispossessed of the place he had long occupied and can no more lay claims to it. As the city splinters along ethnic lines, it becomes impossible for different religious groups within the same spaces.

Pari Darwaza, a place marked with sets of different pasts, gets radically reconstructed by its inhabitants. It's a space that represents relative harmony among different ethnic communities early in the novel. Housing the palanquin, dowry pots and pans of Roop's mother, Pari Darwaza is a 'commemorative' space (term borrowed from Maurice Halbwachs). Later in the novel, it transforms into a site where Bachan Singh inscribes patriarchal violence and communal honour on Kusum's body. It's a place that gets continuously interpreted in the novel; a place whose meaning is made and remade in the present. David Harvey argues that the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. Henri Lefebvre, in his socio-spatial analysis posits that the right to the city includes the rights of women, children, elderly, the rights of the proletarian, the peasant, the rights to training and education, to work, to culture, to rest. He also demands that the right to the city should be complemented by the right to difference and the right to information. This becomes quite crucial in the case of migrants and refugees. It would enable them to have their distinct social and cultural characteristics recognized by the local citizens. Studies by Mark Purcell, E. Isin, Don Mitchel too point towards issues of rights, entitlements and responsibilities with respect to the city space. The representation of Delhi in the novel, especially spaces like the Imperial hotel and the Railway station lead to a rethinking of the city space. Post Partition, Delhi served as a place where the refugees enacted their identities and staked out a place for themselves, laying claims to citizenship.

Speaking for the rights of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants, Derrida supports the demand for the setting up of a series of 'Cities of Refuge' where migrants could seek sanctuary from the pressures of persecution, intimidation, and exile. The concept of Cities of Refuge aims towards assisting refugees, immigrants, and asylum seekers beyond the traditional nation state politics within a sphere of local, regional aid. Derrida calls for the rediscovery of the ethics of hospitality and argues that a city should be able to serve as refuge in ways the nation state cannot. People's ability to find refuge or sanctuary in a particular place is not a given or automatic. Refuge is an ongoing process that must be fought for and struggled over. Refuge takes place in local spaces and relationships. The city is a political space that is continuously reclaimed through the spatial practices and tactics of its inhabitants. Refuge, therefore, is to be understood as a process of negotiation and contestation. In the novel, *What the Body Remembers*, it is in the city of Delhi that 'refuge' is worked out. The dilapidated uncarpeted bungalow allotted to Sardarji, the room where Bachan Singh lives in Karol Bagh, the circle of shops in Connaught Place are spaces of interaction where refugees negotiate, contest, and reclaim citizenship through various spatial practices. The novel examines how this process of contestation unfolded in various areas of Delhi where the refugees settled after the Partition. By examining these negotiations over belonging and refuge in specific sites within Delhi, the novel seeks to address to Derrida's efforts to unmask the hospitality of the nation state and discern a new politics of refuge in the city.

This paper has shown how material memory of the Partition migrants and refugees, acted as a stimulus for the recollection of their pre-Partition selves. Material memory, as being constitutive of individual and collective identities, offers powerful insights into the pre-Partition subjectivities of Partition's displaced. This paper has also shown how during Partition, spaces and places became sites of intersecting identities where the Partition refugees made claims to citizenship through a difficult and complex process of contestation. The paper has looked at different spaces

in Shauna Singh's novel as bearing witness to the intriguing negotiations of refuge, identity and belonging in these multilayered constructs of social change. By drawing attention to the concept of territoriality and looking at these spaces as socially potent, changeable material, the paper has demonstrated how Partition enabled a new politics of refuge for the Partition's displaced subject.

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