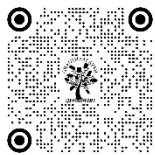


SCULPTING SELF IN STRUGGLE: A PERFORMATIVE EXPLORATION OF SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S *WHAT THE BODY REMEMBERS*

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ABSTRACT

Shauna Singh Baldwin's Commonwealth Prize-winning book, *What the Body Remembers* (2000), explores the harsh realities of the history of partition. Baldwin makes the argument that gender places are socially constructed and assessed through performances, which results in a violation of oneness. By applying Butler's theory of performativity, the paper examines the voices that have been muted because of a particular tradition. By examining the text through Butler's performativity framework, one can argue that performances fundamentally naturalize gender constructs. The psyche interferes with the internalisation process, which leads to melancholy. Therefore the paper tries to offer a new way of looking at the performance of gender places in a different perspective giving recognition to all the marginalised voices. Indo-Canadian author Shauna Singh Baldwin's first book, *What the Body Remembers*, explores the terrible realities of partition from the standpoint of the Sikh community. In 1999, the book won her the Commonwealth Pens Prize. It is notorious for describing the violence that followed Partition and for showing how the inflated effect of social-artistic spots on gender places led to violations of mortal freedom. Baldwin's depiction of tortured characters and their disturbed psyches captures the pressure and fermentation of the time. The power dynamics between politics and history, as well as how they're entwined with fornication, are outlined in the book. It also highlights how people — women in particular — come the goat for the insincerity of society.

Keywords: Identity Formation, Narrative Analysis, Postcolonial Literature, Trauma, Memory, Cultural Identity, Gender and Violence

1. INTRODUCTION

Judith Butler's theory of performativity states that performance is a result of the totality of acts and behaviour that a person gets accustomed to in life according to their genders and sexes in society. However, according to Butler, performance is not related to sexuality and can be understood if the underlying idea behind the performance is realized: "The anticipation conjures its object" (Butler 14). Thus, the concept must be evaluated "Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (15). The book tells the story of two women, Roop and Satya, who were damaged by social prejudices and partition tragedies. There is rivalry between Roop and Satya, after Sardarji marries Satya as his second wife. The women stand for two distinct gender performance styles. However, both characters

suffer from violence, which is a kind of coercion. The image of Kusum's mutilated body, who is claimed to have voluntarily submitted to her father-in-law's kirpan for the sake of communal honour, introduces the violence in the book.

Butler's definition of performativity is that it is a concept that can adapt to changing conditions and is not a transient idea. It could also be a habit that is repeated to fit in with society's expectations. In other words, the idea of performativity needs to be upheld using fresh and varied performances that do not confine the individual to specific gender roles. The way that Roop perceives herself as defying the opposing confining conventions is examined in Baldwin's book. She attempts to highlight the play of hidden power in the book as well as the threatened existence of the female characters. The hypocrisy of the authorial power in victimizing the subject, making them the object of violation during partition, is the hidden power that Baldwin is trying to portray.

Through Butler's performativity lens, the novel reveals how performances inherently construct and reinforce femininity's normative expressions. Performances naturalize gender roles, and these might lead to the creation of new performances. An individual is constrained by norms that establish gender roles. Because of the role society plays, people are shaped and constructed in a way that forces them to live up to expectations. Social standards are thus used to stylize gender roles. "The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and hence must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler 179). Roop identifies her gendered self as representing familial norms, by doing away with education as she is told, "reading is for defeated girls, girls who can't get married" (Baldwin 105). Society moulds an individual in the early phase itself, which is from the pre-oedipal phase, which allows an easier chance for the subject to get imbibed into the system.'

Despite having their roots in the outside world, gender roles are stylized within the individual and eventually become embedded in social norms. These behaviours, which might include language, gestures, and even movements, all have an impact on the person's self-identification process. The person learns and reproduces certain actions as a result of internalizing the habitual repetition of specific daily tasks. These performances, however, represent cultural expressions that are made visible through the body itself rather than a real interior identity. As rightly observed by Wolf: "It is not that woman does not possess an identity but that the 'ideal image has become obsessively important" (59). Though it has its roots in the outside world, the stylization of gender roles takes place inside the individual and eventually becomes embedded in social norms. The person's process of self-identification is influenced by these behaviours, which might include language, gestures, and even movements.

Certain daily tasks are routinely repeated, internalized, and eventually learned and replicated by the individual. However, these performances represent cultural manifestations that are expressed through the body itself, not a true inner identity. Baldwin essentially brings out this by showing how family, the social construct, ideally construct Roop as different from Jeevan, her brother. "She should have been less strong, that was it" (WBR 21). Roop possessed remarkable physical strength, a trait she was expected to hide. Nevertheless, she was prohibited from physically confronting her brother, as such actions were deemed inappropriate for her gender role. To instil in her the social duties she was expected to embrace, the elders compelled her to witness her mother's suffering during childbirth, emphasizing the lesson of "understanding the purpose of women" (WBR 32).

Women are treated as commodities and turned into tools of exchange by the social norms imposed by patriarchal systems. As a result, the institution of marriage provides an essential setting for discussions and relationship building. Baldwin draws attention to the social forces that objectify women's positions and present them as being constrained by outside demands. Since their activities are determined by the demands of their male counterparts rather than by their wants, the female characters suffer from deep disillusionment. After marriage, a woman's condition is mostly dictated by her husband, a concept Baldwin challenges by describing the struggles she endured in her husband's home. First, she inherited her authority from her father, who imposed social standards that she absorbed. When she passed from her father's custody to her husband's, she felt obliged to make sure the family legacy would continue. Roop essentially carried the weight of her male overseers, who determined her daily jobs and obligations. She was trained to be a puppet and lived a life without any wants or ambitions of her own.

The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, positioned through the gendered stylization of body what we take to be an internal feature of ourselves is the one we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts. (Butler xv)

Baldwin presents a striking contrast between the two submissive women, Roop and her mother, and the character of Satya, who is depicted as an exceptionally strong-willed individual. Society condemned her for her assertive demeanor, as women were traditionally expected to embody traits of shyness and timidity. Satya stands out as an anomaly, refusing to adhere to the societal norms dictated by her gender. Despite her assertive nature, she demonstrated care and affection for her husband, adapting her behavior to meet his expectations. Through Satya, Baldwin explores the complexities of individual desires and societal pressures, particularly as she grapples with her perceived inadequacy in providing Sardarji with an heir, a situation that was deemed a significant flaw in her identity. The social context and historical period of the novel are crucial, as a woman unable to bear children was often regarded as worthless in society.

The female body was assigned the significant role of serving as a vessel for the continuation of lineage. This association with motherhood is evident in the narrative, particularly when Sardarji chooses to remarry due to his first wife's inability to bear children. Consequently, Roop is tasked with the responsibility of perpetuating Sardarji's lineage, which results in her losing her individuality and aspirations. Roop's experience exemplifies the objectification of women's bodies, as she becomes a target of Sardarji's masochistic tendencies. Baldwin employs this theme of objectification to illustrate the disempowerment of women, using satire to challenge the perception that women's physical strength is inferior to that of men. This process of objectification serves as a mechanism through which societal performances are reiterated and normalized. In this context, a woman's role is primarily recognized in biological terms, leading to the body overshadowing the psyche in social interactions. The imposition of silence upon the female body further reinforces patriarchal authority.

Society imposes laws on individuals, transforming them into biological instruments tasked with fulfilling specific roles, while their actions remain entirely dictated by societal expectations. Roop's mother exemplifies this societal agency; she never emerged from her veils nor ventured beyond the confines of Paridarwaza. Her existence was confined within the limits established by societal norms, and she seamlessly integrated into the system through unquestioning compliance. Roop's initial hesitance to express her thoughts, followed by her evolution into a determined individual, serves as a vehicle for Baldwin to highlight the necessity for women to articulate their dissent to liberate themselves from the grip of patriarchy. This underscores the significant role of language in transforming individual performances.

A continued silence increases the likelihood of being targeted by dominant power structures, which seek to oppress and maintain control over marginalized groups. While religion is a significant factor contributing to the violence depicted in the novel, Baldwin broadens the concept of femininity by avoiding hierarchical distinctions among Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh women in terms of victimization. The violence illustrated in Baldwin's work reflects the turmoil experienced during the partition, which rendered many individuals voiceless in the face of atrocities. The identity of these 'subjects' becomes apparent through the narratives of partition. The failure to acknowledge the silence of feminine subjects prompted writers like Baldwin to address the previously unrecognized acts of violence. Baldwin's portrayal of dismemberment symbolizes the trauma of partition, as illustrated by the image of a woman's body lying beneath, with Kusum's limb severed at the joint.

The body was dismembered into six sections and then arranged to create the illusion of wholeness once more. Kusum's womb had been violently extracted, accompanied by the chilling message: "We will eradicate your kind, your very species from existence... We will leave you its shell." This narrative objectifies Kusum, likening her to the womb, a metaphor frequently employed by various authors to represent femininity. The violence depicted is intertwined with communal animosity, with femininity as the primary victim, a critique articulated by Baldwin. Bachan Singh embodies patriarchal authority, choosing to protect communal honour by executing his daughter-in-law rather than allowing her to be tainted by others. His belief that "death should be preferable to dishonour for good Sikh girls" exemplifies the hypocrisy of patriarchy during that era. Baldwin has consistently criticized the notion of a woman's body as a symbol of honour. As Butalia insightfully noted, "... partition provided the rationale for making women symbols of national honour." All female characters in the narrative suffer from the brutal humiliation inflicted upon them due to their physical existence. Baldwin advocates for an awareness of how bodily representations influence individual identity formation and emphasizes the necessity of challenging stereotypes through new expressions. The psyche internalizes these performances, leading to individual torment.

The idea that sexuality is internalized even before a child's birth through societal performance is emphasized in Baldwin's interpretation of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. He argues that masculine and feminine identities are shaped by a child's painful interactions with socially constructed norms. This perspective elucidates the understanding that

gender is not merely a reflection of biological sex but is instead a product of social compulsion that becomes ingrained in the psyche over time. The characters in Baldwin's novel illustrate how an individual's psyche is formed by societal expectations, which delineate roles and dictate how these roles are enacted in everyday life.

Butler's insights into the sexed position are significant within this psychoanalytic framework. Society categorizes identities based on biological distinctions, and the act of labeling a child as either a girl or a boy establishes the parameters of that child's existence, which is realized through performative actions. Central to Butler's discussion of the normativity of the performative is an understanding of the influence and power that characterize social relations among individuals. The patriarchal structure upheld by Roop's father and Sardarji enforced silence upon women, which was regarded as a highly valued trait expected of females. Sardarji's disdain for Satya's assertive and bold demeanor led him to favor Roop's silence over Satya's outspoken nature. When a woman steps beyond the confines of patriarchal expectations, she faces ostracism and punishment, as exemplified by Sardarji's treatment of Satya. Gender roles are constructed in such a manner that men are compelled to embody masculinity through action, while women are expected to adopt a stoic demeanor, accepting limitations and submission. Consequently, male dominance manifests as a violent performance that renders femininity as silent, veiled, and romantic, stripping women of their freedom of expression.

Forcing an individual to conform to prescribed gender roles constitutes a breach of personal identity. The journey of gender identification often evokes a sense of sadness when one struggles to assimilate societal norms. Roop's initial hesitance to accept the disparate treatment she receives in comparison to her brother illustrates her emotional turmoil in defining her gender. Furthermore, Roop is prohibited from engaging in her beloved activity of riding, as her father fears that any failure to meet societal expectations regarding her virginity could tarnish his reputation. An individual's social and gender identity is framed within a linguistic system that categorizes them as either 'son' or 'daughter.' Both Roop and Kusum express a feeling of squandered energy, as their anger remains confined within their minds (as seen in Roop's internal reflections). Roop's voice is stifled, allowing her only to express her pain through the narrative of the novel. In this context, Baldwin seeks to create a space for those voices that have been marginalized and silenced. Kusum, too, is rendered a voiceless object, her thoughts never acknowledged beyond the confines of a patriarchal society, not even within the narrative itself. She embodies the consequences of a patriarchal power dynamic.

2. CONCLUSION

Roop's evolution from a submissive figure to one of assertive strength can be likened to Showalter's examination of the various phases within literary subcultures. This transformation of Roop can be mapped into the stages of imitation, internalization, protest, and self-discovery. At first, Roop adhered blindly to established conventions and practices, rendering herself a passive instrument within the power structure. She absorbed the societal norms, resulting in her actions and expressions becoming mere performances. Furthermore, she immersed herself in a realm of silence, a characteristic associated with femininity during the partition period. The subsequent stage is one of protests, where she asserts her rights as a mother, rights that were unjustly taken from her by Satya. Upon recognizing her influence over the prevailing power dynamics, she embarked on a journey of self-discovery, mirroring Satya's actions and advocating for her entitlements. This transformation in Roop clearly illustrates that performativity is subject to change. Through Roop, Baldwin contends that an individual's identity should not be solely defined by their physical form. In this context, Butler explores the notion of performativity by challenging common misconceptions in people's mental frameworks and perceptions, thereby demonstrating that the concept of gender is fluid.

Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel illustrates Judith Butler's notion of performativity, as the characters experience oppression stemming from societal expectations imposed on the feminine subject. This directly aligns with Butler's theory, which articulates how performances create a hierarchical distinction between male and female bodies. The suppressed voices resulting from this partitioned violence are poignantly represented in Baldwin's work. As previously noted, societal norms infringe upon individual freedom. However, through the character of Roop, Baldwin effectively challenges and subverts the stereotypes linked to gender roles. These roles, deeply ingrained in society, manifest as performances that significantly violate individual identity. The text primarily examines the violence inflicted upon the feminine psyche by socio-cultural influences. The actions that are perceived as performances arise from societal expectations, ultimately causing mental and sexual harm to individuals. Consequently, the 'body' serves as a conduit for socio-cultural interactions, while the psyche, shaped by these performances, leads to a disregard for individuality. Femininity often becomes a target of such violence, particularly during times of conflict, due to the entrenched stereotypes associated with gender roles.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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