

Fulfilling Her “Duty to Her Quom”:
The Punjabi-Sikh Ethos of Shauna Singh
Baldwin’s *What the Body Remembers*

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“For there is no identity without memory. . . .”

Catharine Stimpson, “The Future of Memory” (1987)

“The idea imposes itself as I write it: every language should be bi-lingual!”

Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Love in Two Languages* (1983)

“They will remember me and I will remind them of their duty to their quom.”

What the Body Remembers (1999)

Set in undivided Punjab, chiefly between the momentous years of 1928 and 1947, Shauna Singh Baldwin’s bestselling debut novel, *What the Body Remembers* (1999), contests both the relative global silencing of sub-continental Partition history and the patriarchalism of colonial and Indian nationalist ideology. At the same time, it challenges the triumphalism of post-Independence secular rhetoric, and the dominant Hindu, male perspective in post-Independence Indian fiction. By drawing on the Punjabi literary genres of medieval Gurmat, Bhakti, and Sufi poetry in the Guru Granth Sahib and on the kissa¹ (romance narrative) and daстан (popular folktale), the novel tells an epic story of Sikh dislocation. And by narrating Sikh religious and political history as it impacts the private lives of the characters, it conveys the cultural memory of Singh Baldwin’s quom (“people,” “community,” or “nation”).² Narrated primarily by Satya and Roop, the warring co-wives of Sardarji, an Anglicized Sikh landowner whose family is violently displaced by Partition, the story also serves as an allegory of the communal rifts and bloody coming-of-age of postcolonial India and Pakistan. Finally, the novel denounces the oppressions of colonial English as well as Hindi lingualism

and culturalism in various ways, as it forges a Punjabi-Sikh idiom in English by incorporating Punjabi words, syntax, rhythm, and referentiality. This article examines these many ways in which Singh Baldwin—marked by her particular history as a female, minority, Sikh, diasporic writer³—“re-members the [Sikh] body,” thereby representing and memorializing pre-Partition Punjabi culture and sensibility to write the first Sikh feminist novel in English.

I. Giving a Sikh Voice to Sub-continental Partition History

Beginning as the short story “Satya,” collected in Singh Baldwin’s *English Lessons and Other Stories* (1996),⁴ *What the Body Remembers* grew to be a near-500 page, quasi-historical novel chronicling the last decade of British colonial rule in India and its culmination in the brutal Partition of 1947. Underscoring the limited western attention to sub-continental Indian history, explained by what she recognizes are the “economic realities of the publishing industry” and the attendant cultural imbalances, Singh Baldwin points out that as of 1998 there were only about six hundred non-fiction books and five novels in English on the Indian Partition compared to more than 70,000 books about the American Civil War and thousands of novels in English and other languages about World War II and the Holocaust (qtd. in Sinha; “SAWNET Bio”). And there was certainly no English-language fiction that “put Sikh women front stage center” or represented their experiences during Partition (Singh Baldwin qtd. in Methot). To contest this deafening silence, as well as to challenge patriarchal colonial and Indian nationalist discourse generally, Singh Baldwin writes a feminist historical narrative revolving around two Sikh women narrators, Satya (“truth”) and Roop (“body”), and their polygamous husband Sardarji.⁵

Drawing on the paradigm of the kissa tradition in Punjabi, the novel tells in the main the story of Sardarji, an Oxford-trained engineer and a rich zamindar (landlord) in Rawalpindi, who takes a poor, young second wife, Roop, when his first wife, Satya, fails to bear him a child and a male heir to continue his line. As the divisive communal and religious politics of Partition take shape on the distant horizon, Sardarji’s home is wracked by battles between Satya and Roop over control of Roop’s

(easily conceived and born) children, the earning of Sardarji’s favor, and the preservation of the family’s status within the community. It is only when Satya dies—through tuberculosis deliberately contracted as a way to save face as the barren and discarded elder wife—that she and Roop are reconciled as “sisters,” with Roop “re-membering” Satya’s “body” in her own, sounding like her, acting like her, becoming Badi Sardarniji, the role Satya has evacuated.⁶

Of the best-known Punjabi kissas, *Heer Ranjha*, *Mirza Sahiban*, *Pooran Bhagat*, *Raja Rasalu*, *Sasi Punnu*, *Dulla Bhatti*, and *Sohni Mahiwal*, centered on tales of love, passion, friendship, loyalty, and sacrifice, but also betrayal and revenge. *What the Body Remembers* most resembles *Kissa Pooran Bhagat*, itself a variant of the Greek story of Oedipus.⁷ *Pooran Bhagat* is the tragic tale of King Salwan, Queen Icchran, their son Pooran, and the King’s second, younger wife Loona, who desires her stepson. Rebuffed by Pooran, Loona tells the King that Pooran has tried to violate her modesty—a fabricated crime for which Pooran is put to death. In a modern-day rewriting of *Pooran Bhagat*, then, Singh Baldwin depicts the complicated familial relationships among Sardarji (the King Salwan character), Satya (now depicted as the “desirous” senior wife, who dies for her “crime” of coveting her [infant] stepson), Roop (the self-sacrificing younger wife), and their children. At the same time, however, the novel tells the tragic epic-national story of England, India, and Pakistan in allegorical, conjugal terms.

Following the fortunes of the three main characters, the novel ranges over large swathes of undivided Punjab. Moving first between Sardarji’s vast land holdings in the Pothwar Plateau in 1928, including the tiny hamlet of Pari Darvaza, Roop’s home, the narrative next shifts to Murree and Sohawa, Rawalpindi and Lahore, and Simla and Delhi, before ending in post-Partition New Delhi in 1965. Here Satya is reborn in the epilogue as a girl child in a “body that remembers” the “pain and emptiness” of her past gendered existence, born into a time when “men have not yet changed” (*What the Body Remembers* 470–71).

This epic sweep not only takes in the Sardarji-Satya-Roop family saga but also refracts the historiography of mid-twentieth-century Indian nationalism through the minority Sikh perspective. As Roop narrates

stories of her sister Madani's and her own maturation, the reader learns as well about dawning Sikh disaffection and the insidious politics of religion and ethnicity underwriting the Indian freedom movement, even as early as 1933:

While they have been at Bhai Takht Singh's, learning the Gurus' shabads and embroidery, so many events have passed them by. Mahatma Gandhi walked two hundred and forty miles to pick up a lump of salt and refused to pay the British tax on it. Freedom fighter Bhagat Singh [a Sikh] climbed the gallows and swung for tossing a bomb into the legislative assembly to make the deaf hear; his Sikh friends and relatives say the Mahatma stood by as if he were deaf himself and, in the name of non-violence, just let the British kill him. The Mahatma raised the national flag of a free India and it did not have a strip of deep Sikh blue as he promised. . . . (83)⁸

And in 1942, as the country hurtles toward Partition and Independence, toward a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India, with little room for the Sikhs,⁹ the spirited Satya gives shelter to Nihang Sikhs armed against murderous Muslims as well as against traitorous Hindus:

When a jatha of pilgrims on their way to visit every gurdwara between Lahore and Peshawar stops to ask for water from a Sikh well, Satya tells Dehna Singh to bring them into the haveli. Nihang Sikhs, they wear the bright blue and saffron of the Defender Sikh sect, carrying long sharp steel talwars encased in sun-faded scabbards bouncing against their calves, in place of the usual shorter kirpans. On their turbans they wear the khanda; its crossed swords shine their willingness to fight for God and quom. (312)

And even the urbane, westernized, non-partisan Sardarji, who has worked alongside the English in his profession as a civil engineer, wonders "how minorities like the Sikhs will be protected" and concludes "no one takes them seriously" (363). The choice in such partisan times

is stark and unambiguous: “the Sikhs must organize or die” (373). And so, forced by the communalism around him, Sardarji, like untold others, reaches deep into his Sikh self and rejects hybridity for purity, Indianness for Sikhi:

Analysing and reanalysing the situation points only to the same conclusion, again and again: Sardarji’s treasured ambivalence must be forsaken. His greatest asset, his ability to straddle cultures and colours, an ability developed over years, must be curbed, must be restrained. . . . he must . . . tear down all his mental bridges to other quoms. . . . He must gather all the Sikh aspects of his being into one file, mark it top priority, then let it ride above the rest. He must view himself in one dimension, as just a Sikh, only a Sikh, with no affiliations past or present beyond religion. . . . (385)

Partition cleaves the Sikh nation, wrenching them violently from their lands, their holy sites, their way of being. The “choice” for the Sikhs, as Sardarji sees it, is between “a massacre by Muslims or slow death under the rule of Hindus—like choosing between cancer and tuberculosis” (383). Working with a heavy heart as part of the Punjab Boundary Commission on the impossible task of dividing “every snaking ditch and hand-placed lump of dirt in Punjab, the work of hundreds of years to be cut in half somewhere, in an instant,” he “draws a deep crimson line down the Chenab River” (386) to protect Sikh interests. This “line” would have taken “hallowed ground, where Guru Nanak was born, where he travelled, where the other nine Gurus who carried his spirit preached and lived and died, out of reach of the Islamic state, into India. . . . [and transferred] ninety percent of Sikh-owned land into India” (*What the Body Remembers* 386). But his recommendations are summarily rejected by the Commission. And when the final border is demarcated, with cities and lands “dealt out randomly like playing cards,”¹⁰ the narrative mourns the fact that Guru Nanak’s birthplace, Talwandi, goes to Pakistan, as do the gurudwaras in Nankana Sahib and Panja Sahib, that the domain of Maharaja Ranjit Singh has been so carved up, that Sikh history has been so diminished.

Yet, finally, even as countless Sikh refugees from the newly formed Pakistan flood Delhi, Amritsar, and other northern Indian cities, Roop remarks on their resilient spirit. Frantic with fear as she waits to meet Sardarji traveling on a train from Lahore to Delhi—for scores of trains have arrived with all their Sikh and Hindu passengers slaughtered—Roop comes across a petty hawker, a Sikh boy named Zorawar after Guru Gobind Singh's son, whose description bears comment:

Zorawar.

The name of the Tenth Guru's youngest son, martyred by the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb, bricked up alive and breathing in a wall with his brother in full sight of his mother. Zorawar, the name of a young Sikh boy who died but would not recite the Kalima and convert to Islam. . . . He smiles a radiant smile like Timcu's, like Aman's, and hope stirs once more in Roop.

My people, Punjabi Sikhs, will survive; this Zorawar's spirit is in them. They will not beg, they will not die, they will work and build their lives again.

I will survive. . . . (438; italics in original)

Not only, then, does Zorawar come to symbolize Sikh fortitude and heroism in a violent and terrible time, but in thus foregrounding a minority Sikh perspective, in telling their stories, both collective and individual, heroic and ordinary, *What the Body Remembers* reveals its thoroughgoing revisionism of dominant Indian national history in multiple ways.

II. Forging in the Smithy the Conscience of Her Race: *What the Body Remembers* as Sikh History

That Singh Baldwin has paid meticulous attention to historical accuracy in her novel only strengthens her attempt to (metaphorically) “forge in the smithy the conscience of her race.”¹¹ As she states in an interview with Rich Rennicks, “I’ve kept political events in their historical place. . . . I want you to feel you can trust my dates, names of politicians and policies” (qtd. in Rennicks). And historical dates, names, and political events there are many: from the meticulously dated prologue set in Rawalpindi in 1895, through the chapters and parts covering the

period between 1928 and 1947, to the epilogue set in New Delhi in 1965. There are uncountable references to colonial history, including the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the rise of the Muslim League and the Indian National Army, and Gandhi’s salt march and non-cooperation movement. In addition, Mountbatten, Nehru, Jinnah, Tara Singh, and Cyril Radcliffe and the Boundary Commission are bit players in the narrative. And the novel closes with details about post-Independence India, refugee resettlement, and the repatriation of women under the Abducted Persons Recovery and Restoration Act of 1949. But most telling and thorough of all is Singh Baldwin’s writing of collective Sikh history. She charts their lineage to “invaders whose traces still remain” among modern-day Sikhs, to Persians, Alexander the Great, the Huns, Mahmud of Ghazni, the Mongols, and the Mughals (17). She traces the particulars of the birth and spread of Sikhism, from Guru Nanak’s ascension as saint to Guru Gobind’s warriorhood. And she narrates fact-filled stories about Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s vast kingdom and Maharaj Nabha’s rule. Along the way, the reader learns about political and cultural Sikhism, both past and present, about Sikh valour and resistance to persecution by “Afghan and Mughal tyrants” (182), and about Bhai Vir Singh’s celebrated novels set in “the days when the Sikhs were driven into the jungles, when the Sikhs were starving but survived by their wits and their kirpans, never converting to Islam” (100). Stories abound about Sikh martyrs, including men and women, adults and children, who gave their lives for their faith; about Tara Singh, the Akali Dal, and the demand for a Sikh homeland in the twentieth century; about the betrayal of the Sikh quom by national leaders with other priorities; and about Sikh resilience, fortitude, and heroic survival through the ages, guided by their Gurus and their faith.

Such meticulous attention to historical detail is rooted in Singh Baldwin’s exhaustive research, both in the libraries of the west and in the field in Pakistan and India. Not only did *What the Body Remembers* take her three years to write, but Singh Baldwin also read twelve hundred history books, tax codes, District Gazetteers, British memoirs, and even Raj cookbooks to flesh out the context of her characters’ lives. She interviewed women who were first wives, lived under polygamous

conditions, and survived Partition. While the acknowledgments page lists Hugh McLeod's books on Sikhism, J.S. Grewal's books on Sikh history, Owen Cole and Piara Singh Sambhi's *The Sikhs* (1978), and Urvashi Butalia's book *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) as key sources for the history embedded in *What the Body Remembers*, Singh Baldwin's debts and accomplishments are wider by far. Not only has she written a veritable history of the Sikhs in *What the Body Remembers*, but she has also given us the feel and fabric of a culture in its day-to-day lived experience, detailing rituals of birth, marriage, and death; food and dress habits; sights, sounds, and smells, until Pari Darvaza and Gujarkhan, Rawalpindi and Lahore come alive for the reader. As Singh Baldwin points out to Rennicks, "To write fiction about a traumatic event like Partition, writers [also] need to research setting—smells, flowers, fauna, birds, minerals, geography, mythology, distances, local customs—and spend time talking with people." More than her success in representing Partition and its larger physical and cultural setting is her success in reproducing the quotidian rhythms of life in undivided Punjab with what Kevin Baldeosingh praises as "documentary exactitude" (qtd. in Steininger).¹² So much so that an admiring reader states in an amazon.com review that *What the Body Remembers* is "the best gift" he has ever received, for in it he can "see himself and his family, all his childhood and youth" in Dora Budhal village, located in the general vicinity of Pari Darvaza, the setting of much of *What the Body Remembers* (Bindra).

Furthermore, addressing her western readers specifically, Singh Baldwin hopes that her novel, like all "great historical fiction," enables them to immerse themselves in "the novelist's world" and thus to "relive other times, inside a different skin, perhaps of a different race, or a different faith" ("In Search of Herstory"). The reader learns of the Sikh belief in the veritable physical embodiment of the gurus in the holy book when Roop's Papaji orders the household cleansed of Hindu "superstitions and ceremonies" and Muslim pieties, ordering instead a Sikh Akhand Path, that involves "three days of reading the Guru's words" from the Guru Granth Sahib to "purify this house," and of family members "wak[ing] the holy book in the morning . . . garland[ing] it with marigolds, dress[ing] it, gold-bordered silk rippling from between

its pages, offer[ing] it sticky-sweet parshaad, then pretend[ing] it has eaten” (42–43). When Satya conducts another Akhand Path to mark her “adoption” of Roop’s baby girl, the Ardaas prayer places Roop’s “sacrifice” in a larger cultural context which the reader now comprehends more fully, having read about Mata Sundari, the wife of the tenth guru, Gobind, as she “watched her two sons . . . bricked up alive rather than convert to Islam,” and other historical Sikh women who “saw their men cut to pieces limb from limb by Muslim tyrants . . . men and women who were cut by saws, who were flayed alive . . . but did not convert” (182). And when Papaji recounts his visit to the site of the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, in which two thousand Sikhs perished, he personalizes the deaths, telling of the people “some talking, laughing, playing cards,” some “just sitting, minding the shoes of people who had gone to pay their respects at the Golden Temple,” some there “because their homes were too small to fit all the family members who had arrived for the [Baisakhi] fair” (44–45), so that even the modern-day western reader relives the trauma of the event and re-members Sikh history.

III. “A Very Feminist Book,” or the “Radical Notion That a Woman is a Person”

Even as *What the Body Remembers* memorializes and humanizes the collective Sikh past, it is as a kissa chiefly about Sikh women, set in the crucial years of Indian Independence and Partition, and told through the perspective of female narrators, that the novel impresses most. Commenting on her choice of writing her story as a history told by Sikh women, Singh Baldwin points out the dual challenge she had to face. Not only have Sikh scholars tended to prize theology over history—understandable in the case of a religious minority—but the few Sikh-authored histories that exist have, like most histories, been male-centered. Thus it is that in *What the Body Remembers*, Singh Baldwin had to “pull Sikh women’s history out from under Sikh men’s history” (qtd. in Methot), which accounts for its being “a very feminist book if you define feminism as the radical notion that a woman is a person” with human rights, including the right “to own her own body” (Singh Baldwin, “Author Essay”). Additionally, says the novelist, the book

“comments on woman to woman power relations, surrogate motherhood, and the two strains of feminism, strident [as in Satya] and persuasive [as in Roop], that we have in operation today” (“Author Essay”), thus making it the first Sikh feminist novel in English.

In her aptly titled essay “In Search of Herstory,” Singh Baldwin acknowledges her debt to western feminism, writing “I immerse myself in historical novels . . . to remember what it was like before the arguments of feminists brought me this far . . . to be reminded how far so very few women have come on this planet,” continuing, “As a woman of 37 living in North America, I come to historical fiction as a beneficiary of first wave feminism.” But of the non-west she writes, “I am forever aware that women’s rights often do not even enter analyses or history books, and are first to be sacrificed.” It is for this reason that she insistently foregrounds women’s history in *What the Body Remembers*. Yet paradoxically, even as she challenges the silencing of women in South Asia, her engagement with women’s issues in *What the Body Remembers* is rooted primarily in her exploration of the ideal feminine principle in Sikh sacred literature.

Reserving the title of “Kaur” or “princess” for all Sikh women, Sikhism proposes that women and men are equal, as Singh Baldwin notes in her interview with Suzanne Methot, and as Religious Studies scholar Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh has investigated in her groundbreaking works, *The Feminine Principle in the Sikh Vision of the Transcendent* (1993) and *The Birth of the Khalsa: A Feminist Re-Memory of Sikh Identity* (2005). As Roop listens to her English tutor, Miss Barlow, talk about women’s (sin-ridden) descent from Eve, she muses on Sikhism’s much more positive, respectful approach to the female gender, integrating a paraphrase of the appropriate verses from the Guru Granth Sahib into the novel proper. Singh Baldwin writes, “But . . . what would Guru Nanak say? He says all men are born of women, that the lineage continues because of women. The Guru says all women are [as] valuable as princesses and should be called Kaur to remind men of it.”¹³ And she concludes compellingly, “He says, ‘Why should we talk ill of her, who gives birth to kings? . . . there is none without her’” (330). Yet the gap between Sikh spiritual teachings and modern cultural practices troubles Singh Baldwin, so she

“goes back to feminism . . . back to the Sikh faith,” not only to “describe the difference between theory and current practice” but, more importantly, to give us effective female role models—Satya as a strong woman and Roop as a “she-ro” (qtd. in Methot).¹⁴

What is particularly noteworthy in *What the Body Remembers*, then, is that Singh Baldwin displaces the received script of Indian Independence, peopled by Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Bose, and others, with the multiple scripts of Sikh women, of Satya and Roop but also of Roop’s mother Mama, her sister-in-law Kusum, and her grandmother Nani. Instead of narrating larger political events at length, Singh Baldwin considers the impact of national politics on her female narrators and other domestic, mostly Sikh characters, filtering much of her political commentary through them. For instance, she glosses over “the churning in Punjab” in the late 1930s in a single dense page, hastily tracing the public strife over the division between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, over the Sikh Akali pact with the Congress Party, and over the imperative according to Muslims an Islamic nation. Instead, she ends Part Two with a focus on the future of Roop’s marriage to Sardarji:

In Rawalpindi, such news buzzes from the cantonment and the Rawalpindi Club, where Europeans foxtrot to the remembered rhythms of England, to the lanes that cross and loop through Rajah Bazaar.

But in Roop’s good ear [she has gone deaf in one ear following a bout with typhoid] there are only Papaji’s parting words, “Above all, give no trouble [to your husband].” (128)

Similarly, Singh Baldwin addresses the massacres in East India in early 1947—worse was yet to come in Punjab later that year—in a single, cursory paragraph:

But Mr. Farquharson has a point—can India cope with independence? The country is moving rapidly toward anarchy. Prime Minister Attlee’s announcement followed Hindu-Muslim riots in Bengal—four thousand dead in four days, fifty thousand refugees—and Hindu-Muslim riots in Bihar—thirty

thousand dead, a hundred and fifty thousand refugees. Those two provinces are seven hundred miles east of Punjab, and anger carries faster than newsprint. (363)

And August 14, 1947, the day that marks the historically momentous birth of Pakistan, dawns as the reader travels with Roop in her role as mother and wife:

Roop, with Sardarji's children, has turned her back to the Indus; she travels east from the Club Road bungalow in Lahore to "India"—word, name, label, all shorn of meaning. The boundary commission for which Sardarji prepared his recommendations . . . failed to reach consensus, and now somewhere ahead, Roop and her children will cross a line in the dirt, a boundary penned by Sir Cyril Radcliffe, an English man who has never met Roop, Sardarji or their children; who does not know this Punjab he carves . . . creating the Dominions of "India," "East Pakistan" and "West Pakistan," empty names with no history. (389)

Not only does Singh Baldwin thus evince her belief that politics matters chiefly insofar as it affects individual human beings, but she also reveals her particularly feminist sensibility in her treatment of Satya and Roop as the focal points of her narrative, as characters whose private stories come only secondarily to serve as an allegory of Partition. In an interview with Rennicks, Singh Baldwin stresses the fact that she "didn't set out to write a Partition novel at first, but [that] the allegory between the personal story of Satya and Roop . . . and their rivalry for the children *grew naturally into* the political" (emphasis added). Sardarji, she continues, "is like the British, in that for most of the novel, he gets off scot-free as the women battle it out, never blaming him for what he causes. At the end of this novel, no one is a winner, just as in Partition—each community compromised its humanity, and so each community lost" (qtd. in Rennicks).¹⁵ Pointing as well to the "nexus" between "colonization, patriarchy and the treatment of women and children," the author criticizes Sardarji as "no exception, doing to

his women exactly what has been done to him. He colonizes them" (qtd. in Rennicks).

While the allegory of nation-as-woman outlined above holds true to an extent, what is more important is the fact that the allegory is derived from and consequent to Satya's and Roop's personal stories. Instead of generalizing the significance of her characters, Singh Baldwin focuses upon the very real lives, loves, hopes, fears, tragedies, and heroisms of Satya and Roop as tangible, individualized women. Further, she accords agency and, above all, humanity to all her female characters by differentiating and naming each of them, including Satya and Roop, Nani, Mama, and Kusum, as also Revati Bhua, Lajo Bhua, Gujri, Madani, Huma, Toshi, Mani Mai, Bebeji, Jorimon, and even Miss Barlow. Giving each one voice and narrative focus, she individualizes them through their religious, caste, regional, linguistic, and marital/family affiliations. In short, she writes the lives of her large cast of female characters in meticulous detail. We share intimately in Satya's despondency, envy, and fear when Sardarji marries the fertile young Roop. We feel Roop's deep sadness when she is compelled by Sardarji to relinquish her children to Satya. We experience Kusum's terror but also sympathize with her sense of duty when her father-in-law raises his kirpan to "martyr" her rather than have her fall into the hands of the rapacious Muslim mobs.¹⁶

But it is especially in the italicized first-person passages that we identify with and figuratively *become* Satya and Roop as they give voice to their most intimate thoughts about birth and rebirth, faith and doubt, about a mother's death, a husband's indifference, a brother's protection, a woman's kismet, and a country's future. We ask along with Satya, "*How to bear this?*" as she poignantly muses about Roop's third pregnancy and her own marginalization as woman, "*I am not wife, for my husband has abandoned me. I am not widow, for he still lives. I am not mother, for the son [Roop's] he gave me is taken away. I am not sister, for I have no brother. With no father, I am but daughter of my Bebeji. And so I am no one*" (308; italics in original). When Roop writes to her father but says nothing directly about her agony at having to give up her children to Satya, we urge with her, "*Read between the lines, Papaji, read around them, past them, between them. In the spaces between the words is your daughter. In*

the unspoken, in the unwritten, there is Roop" (255; italics in original). We traverse other planes of being with Satya following her earthly death, and with her "*speak from here, from this silence. Waiting with other djinns and shadows also incapable of transcending their haumai, their self-ness*" until we can "*wrest the meaning of life*" so that the "*djinn can progress to atma and take human shape again*" (350; italics in original). And with Roop, we continue to live through the dark days of Partition, asking in tragic interrogatives,

Who will rescue and pyre the bodies of my quom? What use now to be Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or Christian, what use the quom, the biradari, the caste, the compartments that order our lives? What do they do for us now in time of chaos when person meets person and the question between us is only this: Can you feel as I feel? Do you agree to let me live if I let you live? And will you keep that promise even when no one watches, under cover of sandstorms, when the veil is snatched away, will you be kind? (425–26; italics in original)

In writing about a time and culture when men "only saw women from the corners of their eyes" (47), Singh Baldwin thus composes a feminist script centered on Satya and Roop. Capable, ambitious, quarrelsome, heroic Satya is "a woman born before her time into a feudal patriarchal world, fatally unable to lower her resolute grey eyes in front of a man" (Choudhury). And "good-good, sweet-sweet obedient" Roop (255) grows to be a resolute woman as she confronts and survives the horrors of Partition, finally giving her husband "her gift . . . [and] the strength he needs" to contribute to the task of rebuilding India (469). As Singh Baldwin describes Sikh women generally and her female characters in *What the Body Remembers* specifically, she notes that even though Sikhism "says that we are equal," the Sikh woman "still puts her man forward as the head" ("Shauna Singh Baldwin in Search of Home") . But, she counters, "my heroines . . . have ambitions and are well armed. . . . Ambition creates their circumstances and they are able to get what they want" ("Shauna Singh Baldwin in Search of Home"), to end as the "princesses" the Guru proclaimed them to be. Finally, through

its moving account of female Sikh history, the novel also participates in the imperative investigation of the ideological “concept” of “India” as a modern, unified nation through the lens of gender. As Gayatri Spivak describes it, such a “concept” puts “a lid on an immense and equally unacknowledged subaltern heterogeneity” (“Woman in Difference” 98). It is this “heterogeneity,” predicated upon gender, religion, class, caste, and other variables, that Singh Baldwin uncovers in her memorable fiction in *What the Body Remembers*.

IV. “I Have No Nationality as a Writer”: A Global Author for a Global Audience, or the Politics of Multilingualism

To fully analyze Singh Baldwin’s writings as multiply interventionist and resistant to dominant historiography, however, it is important to position her, paradoxically enough, not as a Sikh feminist writer or even as an Indian writing in English, but as a writer with “no nationality,” given her Indian heritage but Canadian and American citizenship and long residence in North America (qtd. in Methot). A self-confessed “hybrid” writer who “hate[s] purity with a passion,” Singh Baldwin still “loves her culture” and is proud to be a Sikh. Yet she is not a reactionary, conservative, or monist Sikh, but rather one who celebrates the syncretism of her religion, as “it takes from the Hindu and the Muslim faiths” (qtd. in Methot). In denying a single, fixed identity herself, whether national, religious, or political, which remains the (questionable) prerogative of dominant groups, Singh Baldwin is concomitantly drawn to the stories of other minorities, of the marginalized, the oppressed, and the silenced, in short, of those “hybrid” others who continue to destabilize the borders of purity and singularity.¹⁷ And it is, understandably, Sikh history and trauma during the Partition years—and Sikh women’s experiences in particular—that draw Singh Baldwin’s attention, for among the “universe of possible narratives” about Partition, it is Sikh voices that have been largely suppressed in the narrative (re)tellings of a Hindu majority India and a Muslim-dominated Pakistan. But once more, Singh Baldwin’s aim and reach in this “re-membering” are global rather than national: she tells the story both to “fill [the] huge gap” in dominant historiography and

to ensure that “we can eventually learn enough from telling the story so that it can’t happen ever again, in the Balkans or anywhere else in the world” (Singh Baldwin, “Author Essay”).¹⁸

Furthermore, as a multi-lingual writer herself, Singh Baldwin writes for a correspondingly complex, dual audience: “one for whom [her books] are written, the other at whom they are written” (Singh Baldwin, “Message to Bookclub Readers”). Hers are books that “tell” a story or “teach” it, depending on the reader. Underlining her commitment to reaching beyond a North American audience, Singh Baldwin notes that *What the Body Remembers* is “not a book written solely for a white, middle-class audience. It is a book written for a hybrid, global audience—in short, for all of us who can read” (“Author Essay”). It is this consideration of her varied world audience that has led Singh Baldwin to insist as a condition of publication that no edition of her novel have a formal glossary for the innumerable Punjabi, Urdu, and Hindustani words and concepts in the novel or even italicize these words and terms in the text. She explains her objection to glossaries and italicization of “foreign” words in a long interview response to Rich Rennicks, an answer in which she strategically switches the terminology of “foreign” and “exotic” to signal the West (rather than India or Pakistan) and to forcefully bring home her point about global learning:

I am against glossaries . . . and the practice of italicizing . . . [because I feel these] are quaint hangovers from colonial times and should be dropped in our Internet era [of easy access to research sources]. We don’t use dictionaries to teach children new words, we believe context is the best teacher. Glossaries have never been provided for books shipped from Europe/North America to anywhere east of Suez, so we know it is possible to read novels about foreign settings and exotic cultures without them. A glossary makes you jump back and forth between the text and the end of the book and jolts you out of the story, besides making it very clear that all the concepts defined in the glossary are “foreign” and “other,” to be promptly erased from your memory when you close the book. (qtd. in Rennicks)¹⁹

A glossary and italicization would have foregrounded the monolingual English-speaking reader and rendered the book “an attempt to explain Indian culture” to this presumed dominant audience (Singh Baldwin, “Author Essay”). Her complete observation about this issue, and the degree of cultural literacy that she demands from her readers, follows. “This book is not an attempt to explain Indian culture,” she writes, “Indian culture just IS in this book—and it is for the rest of the world to figure it out and enjoy it” (“Author Essay”).

Singh Baldwin also points out that there are non-Punjabi Indian and Pakistani readers who will not understand the Punjabi and Urdu words in the novel. Yet she is convinced—and portrays convincingly in her text—that “Punjabi and Urdu words are necessary in [*What the Body Remembers*] because there are concepts and objects in those years and locations that did not exist in European cultures—nor even in today’s contemporary urban Indian culture” (qtd. in Rennicks).²⁰ So while she recognizes that some of her readers may be variously monolingual and “makes allowances” for them in the text, by ensuring that the Indian words are understandable in context or by providing English definitions or equivalents immediately after the Indian words, she attempts to do so “without shortchanging the bilingual or multilingual reader” (qtd. in Rennicks).

V. Speaking “the Language of Guru Nanak,” and the Pursuit of a Human Community

A highly symbolical, self-reflexive passage regarding language usage appears about three-quarters of the way through *What the Body Remembers*, as the narrative recounts a lesson being taught by Miss Barlow to Roop. Roop has been persuaded by her brother, Jeevan, to learn English so that she can become indispensable to her husband in his professional and social dealings with the British. This “value,” he believes, will in turn offer her protection as a woman in a still uncompromisingly patriarchal Punjab. The scene, focalized through Roop, bears quoting at length, as it telescopes the politics of language, as also of gender, religion, and nation in 1940s India, issues that continue to reverberate across 1980s and 1990s Punjabi politics and into contemporary, post-millennial India.

“Write your story,” Miss Barlow’s voice breaks into her [Roop’s] thoughts. “Perhaps you can say you have come to Christ through me.”

Roop . . . dips her pen in the inkwell and writes. But her hand can only remember how to write about Sardarji, and it wants to tell the world only that Satya [the senior wife, now dead] was beautiful as a rani. . . .

“I don’t see the point you’re trying to make, Roop,” says Miss Barlow. “I really don’t.”

Miss Barlow teaches English without knowing a single word of Punjabi—she says Punjabi sounds ugly, hard and rasping. . . . Roop wants to tell her Punjabi is the only language her mama knew, so it is beautiful. She wants to say it was the language of Guru Nanak and of land watered by five rivers and the Indus. But Miss Barlow is deaf to this with both ears. If Roop speaks in Punjabi, her face blanks as if Roop were a jackdaw calling. . . .

Miss Barlow is the teacher-*ni* and Roop knows questions are not welcome. (332–33)

While questions regarding the politics of language were “not welcome” in colonial India, Singh Baldwin’s semantic, semiotic, and cultural transformations of English, as well as her interlinked contestation through women’s language of patriarchal and Hindu nationalist discourse underscore her various challenges to linguistic and social hegemony. As the author notes in an interview, “I have used lots of Punjabi words, some of which are not even used any more, to remind [readers] of the beauty of this language” (“Shauna Singh Baldwin in *Search of Home*”). In this regard, reviewer Shoma Choudhury praises *What the Body Remembers* as “a triumphant and fascinating example of a bilingual sensibility which has successfully and convincingly translated itself into English.” Not only this, but by incorporating indigenous Punjabi words, snippets of conversation, as well as songs and prayers, by integrating translations of local proverbs, transliterated expressions, and local colloquialisms,

and by adopting Punjabi word patterns, Singh Baldwin forges an idiom that accurately reflects and memorializes the larger pre-Partition Punjabi Sikh culture and sensibility.

From the prologue, in which the unlettered Satya, who knows no English, rails against her “karma” and “kismat” for being born a woman, to the Epilogue, when she is reborn as a girl-child in an India where men still “do not welcome girl-babies . . . though [they] call me princess just because the Gurus told [them] to” (471), Singh Baldwin thus writes an alternative, feminist Sikh history in an English imbued with the spirit and substance of the Punjabi language. The Punjabi words and references fall thick and fast: *divan*, *chunni*, *amla*, *kantha*, *pukkhawalla*, *Bhainji*, *paan*, *jutti*, *kundalini*, *mukhtiar*, *pai*, *churail*, *doab*, *sant*, all within the first few pages. Chapter Two opens by tracing the topography of Punjab in highly poetic language that relies on the cultural references of undivided Punjab, especially as personified in *Vayu*, the wind, which knows no physical or national bounds:

When the wind-god, *Vayu*, bearer of perfume, God of all the Northwest of India, blows through the *Suleimans*, he snakes his way through the *Khyber Pass* to Punjab. There he crosses the *Indus* and chases his shadow across the city in the bowl of the *Margalla Hills*. When angry he brings dust storms, when sad he brings rain, watering the cracked lips of the land. . . . Blowing east, *Vayu* gnaws at the plateau called *Pothwar* till it falls away beneath him to plains beyond *Jhelum*. He blows dry past the *Salt Range*, over lush rolling hills where the silvery ribbons of the *Jhelum*, the *Chenab*, the *Ravi* and its canals seek the *Indus*. Then he climbs the watershed between *Lahore* and *Amritsar*. Stooping low for a blessing at the feet of the *Himalayas*, he whisks canals streaming from the *Sutlej* and the *Beas*, sweeps unobstructed across the river plain of the *Ganga* and rises to sear the heart of India. When he returns, circling over the *Arabian Sea*, hauling monsoon clouds into position, he sleeps a weary sleep on the breast of the *Indus*. (17)

Of the birth of Sikhism, Singh Baldwin writes in syntax, rhythm, and referentiality part Vedic Hindu, part Farsi, part Sikh, that reflect the cultural plurality and syncretism of the religion:

Ages later, Vayu saw a boy, Nanak, refuse the ritual black thread of his Hindu ancestors, commune with Muslim Sufis, then walk his own path. He saw Nanak lead the first Sikhs to a single faceless God, and gather into the Sikh quom those who would seek the divine with him. Vayu's winds felt Guru Nanak's spirit enter nine more Gurus' lives, and later it was Vayu who rustled between the pages of the Guru Granth Sahib, when the rapturous poems of all ten Gurus became the Sikh quom's remaining guide. (18)

Sikh hymns and prayers dot the narrative: Roop sings a shabad from the Guru Granth Sahib, "Mera vaid Guru Gobinda," as her mother lies dying (34). When Satya passes away, her maidservant Mumta recites the Kirtan Sohila, the prayer for the dead, "Ik Onkar, Sat Gur Prasad, Jai ghar kirat akhiai, karte ka hoe bicharo" (317). And of the realms Satya traverses after her bodily death, Singh Baldwin writes as follows as she evokes the Sikh belief in the afterlife and rebirth:

I am formless. . . . here I wait, with all the other djinns, stunted, floundering in the cosmos, incapable of transcending our haumai, our self-ness. . . . Just beyond me, tantalizingly beyond my grasp, are realms Guru Nanak described: Dharam Khand, where I might feel satisfaction from having performed my duty . . . then Gian Khand, the level of knowledge . . . Saram Khand, the level of beauty . . . Karam Khand, where Vaheguru's grace might come to bridge the distance between my deeds and words. Then—distant, remote, I feel the pull of Sach Khand, apex plane of sat, the truth I was named for. (349)

One critic denounces this use of Punjabi words and references as superficial "cultural markings" that "function purely at that level without serving a more substantive function," that merely "evoke atmosphere rather than descriptive meaning," and that are "more likely to impede

comprehension on the part of a non-Indian reader” (Rockwell 597, 603). Another critic bemoans Singh Baldwin’s “inflection of dialogue with local color” as the author “uses” Vayu as “a device to breeze through a potted history of India” (Friese). However, Singh Baldwin’s adoption of Punjabi vocabulary and concepts is culturally sensitive, and informed as well as informative, evocative, and above all, genuine. It is the work of a writer who speaks Punjabi, Hindi, and Urdu as well as English; who has recorded a recitation of the Sikh hymns of the Japji Sahib in English and Punjabi;²¹ and who conducted meticulous research in India and Pakistan as well as in the libraries of the west to create a primarily English-language novel, but one imbued with a Punjabi Sikh ethos.

The work of an author who cites the Guru Granth Sahib as her most important literary influence²² and who turns to the “poetry of the 10 Gurus, Bhakti and Sufi saints in the Guru Granth Sahib . . . [for] upliftment” (qtd. in Kandaswamy), *What the Body Remembers* is accurately described by Suzanne Methot as being “written outside the English language’s Judeo-Christian symbology.” More importantly, however, the book “has a different cultural context, employs a different set of symbols . . . and wields a different language” (Methot).²³ And it is this “different” language that enables the reader to “feel the tragedy of a people [the Sikhs] dispossessed of their historical homeland, Punjab” and to comprehend the “philosophy of Sikhism and the quiet dignity of its adherents [that] runs strongly through the narrative” (Whitaker). It is the Punjabi-laced “lyricism” of the novel that leads Bapsi Sidhwa, the author of the highly acclaimed Partition-era novel *Cracking India*, to praise the “historical significance” of *What the Body Remembers* as a “gripping tale of one Sikh family, [that] in the telling opens doors and windows to the psyche and lore of a community” (Rev. of *What the Body Remembers*).

I end this section with the help once more of Singh Baldwin’s poetic words voiced through Roop in her dealings with Miss Barlow:

*Listen to me, you are a woman, like me. Learn my language,
it will not harm you. Use the words I have and maybe we can say
more than*

This is a cat

This is a bat

This is a hat.

I do not have a cat. I have never seen a bat. And I do not wear a hat; I wear a chunni.

Roop could be back in Bhai Takht Singh's school. "A says ah, b says buh, c says cuh." Every English letter has a name and a sound. If they spoke Punjabi she might explain to the governor, the letter and its sound are inseparable as blood and skin, one coursing within the other. The Guru knew this when he made Gurmukhi script; that without sound, one akhar—letter, she corrects herself—might be mistaken for another:

It is the difference in sound that makes each one special.

And then it is the umbrella lines that draw them close and give them meaning. (332–33; italics in original)

Thus it is that in writing a Punjabi-inflected feminist novel, in terms of language and cultural sensibility, Singh Baldwin has recreated for us the "special difference" of Punjabi-ness as well as Sikh history. And in doing so, she has given us "more than a hint of the seriousness and contemporaneity of the many 'Indias' fragmentarily represented in the many Indian Literatures" that Spivak writes about ("How to Read a 'Culturally Different' Book" 127). Furthermore, by writing a Sikh Punjabi novel, Singh Baldwin has resisted that "homogenization of reality, an essentializing of India, . . . [an eliding of] the ambiguous and shifting relations that exist between individuals and groups in a plural community" (Mukherjee 173) that Meenakshi Mukherjee rues in much Indian writing in English. Instead, Singh Baldwin has in *What the Body Remembers* captured the linguistic and cultural "plurality" that the bhasha, or modern Indian language novel, portrays much more effectively than its English counterpart (173, 171–72). Finally, in "recovering a different kind of 'nationalist' past," in Gyanendra Pandey's words, in "recalling not . . . the eternally fixed collective [Indian] subject, but . . . varied, internally differentiated communities, made up of thinking, acting, changing human beings" (205), Singh Baldwin has worked also to build other kinds of political communities in the

future, “more self-consciously historical and more self-consciously accommodating” (Pandey 205). In recounting a non-disciplinary and feminist history of the Sikhs and of Punjab in *What the Body Remembers*—in fulfilling her duty to her quom—she has engendered “a less exclusive and more elective” *human* community that Pandey recommends (205), a new way of imagining India and the world in the new millennium.

VI. Coda: “Forestalling the Global Will to Power”

Writing two years after the publication of *What the Body Remembers*, Peter Hitchcock notes correctly that the very fact of the “discussion [of] writing in English as Anglophone” reveals “one trajectory of the imperial episteme that lives on . . . in the everyday of cultural exchange” (749). But he goes on to point out that, at a time when “the role of English in a geopolitical unconscious is made coterminous with globalization, or americanization, or the worldly largesse of the northern economic axis, and not with the specific functions of English for the British Empire,” (749) we can rightly talk about the ways in which the decolonization of English “not only decolonizes the English, but forestalls the will to power of globalization in the name of English” (749). One of my aims above has been to sketch the contours of how *What the Body Remembers* participates in this forestalling by decolonizing (the) English and by rendering a feminist Sikh ethos and narrating an incisive, fictional history of undivided Punjab.

Furthermore, in an imaginative extension of Hitchcock’s metaphor, “globalization in the name of English” and the role of the “northern economic axis” may be identified as factors contributing to, as well as constituting the official western response to, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. As a rejoinder to what Singh Baldwin dubs the post-9/11 American “slide into fascism” and “fundamentalism,” she has done considerable activist work on behalf of Sikh-Americans and other minorities who bore the brunt of the racist backlash. To both terrorists and racists she says, “Each of us is given the ability to create or destroy—I opt to create” (“Response to Questions from Tehelka”). And to her readers she admits, “Writing helps,” thereby underlining the therapeutic

and functional roles of literature in a world torn asunder by religious, national, ethnic, racial, linguistic, gender-, class-, and caste-based, and economic/corporate ideologies among others (qtd. in Fitzgerald). Thus it is that, on the creative level, Singh Baldwin has chosen to continue to write to “forestall the will to power of globalization in the name of English” and to oppose contemporary economic, military, gender, and cultural imperialism. For example, her 2005 novel *The Tiger Claw*, based on the life of Noor Inayat Khan, a Sufi Muslim Resistance heroine in World War II, can be read as a multi-layered critique of colonial and imperial power and of the “moral ambiguity” of terrorism as undertaken by one’s enemy or oneself (qtd. in Babe). Similarly, her 2007 collection of short stories, *We Are Not in Pakistan*, includes pieces set in locations as varied as the Ukraine, the U.S. South, Toronto, and Central America, and deals with the recurrent themes of culture clash—between majority and minority groups, young and old, men and women, straight and gay—displacement, discrimination, suspicion of the “other,” and fear of retribution in a post-9/11 world. And it is Singh Baldwin’s interest in history, based on her conviction that “the repetitions of history are most striking. How much has not changed, but merely been renamed” (“In Search of Herstory”), as well as her awareness of the exclusions of the non-west and of women from the world historical arena that keeps her reading and writing in search of that solidarity across borders that is the imperative need of our troubled times.

Notes

- 1 Following Singh Baldwin’s practice, I do not italicize non-English words. For a discussion of the issue, see the section of my essay entitled, in part, “I have no nationality as a writer,” as well as note 19 below.
- 2 Rather than following convention and using only the author’s last name, I refer to her as Singh Baldwin to foreground her Sikh heritage. Notable as well is her adoption of the masculine “Singh” (lion) rather than the feminine “Kaur” (princess) in her name. Regarding this, Singh Baldwin confesses, “I lost my family name when I married out of community, and wanted to retain a connection to my heritage. I am no princess and wasn’t being treated as one . . . , so it didn’t seem as if Kaur fit. I took Singh to make myself feel more like a lion. As the guru intended, it reminds me daily that I should be courageous not only for myself but for others” (qtd. in Scalia).

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- 3 Born to Punjabi Sikh parents in Montreal, Canada, in 1962, Singh Baldwin moved to India with her family in 1972, where she attended school and college in Delhi. After earning an MBA from Marquette University in Milwaukee, USA, in 1983, she returned to Canada but came back to Milwaukee three years later and has made her home there ever since with her Irish-American husband, David Baldwin. In an interview with Rich Rennicks, Singh Baldwin underscores the complexity of her relationship to India. Distinguishing among the categories of Indian writers, immigrant Indian writers, and diasporic writers, she identifies herself as a second-generation Canadian-American diasporic writer of Indian origin (Rennicks). It is important as well to note here that prior to Partition, more than 4 million Sikhs were spread across undivided Punjab, with large Sikh populations in Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Peshawar, but today only about 1,000 Sikhs live in Pakistan. Currently, there are approximately 22 million Sikhs in India—approximately 2% of the total population—and about 75 percent of them live in the post-Partition Indian state of Punjab. Of the 2.5 million emigrant Sikhs, the largest numbers are found in the Sikh diasporic communities of UK, Canada, and USA.
- 4 The short story “Satya” won the Saturday Night/CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation] Literary Prize and was later included by Singh Baldwin as the first chapter of *What the Body Remembers*.
- 5 “Sardarji” is the honorific for a Sikh man and the term by which Satya and Roop address their husband, who is never named in the novel. Satya and Roop, in turn, are on occasion referred to as Badi and Choti “Sardarniji,” or Senior and Junior Wife, respectively.
- 6 In an insightful essay on body memory, trauma, and gender in *What the Body Remembers*, J. Mallot notes that “Satya’s story does not end with her body’s demise. In this text, one woman’s lived corporeal experience can speak through the bodies of multiple women. One of the most important gestures regarding body and memory is the relocation of Satya’s hopes, fears, and desires within Roop” (174).
- 7 For an astute analysis of the kissa tradition in contemporary India, see Chapter 5, “*Kissa* as the Locus of Cultural History: *Kissa Pooran Bhagat* in Modern Punjabi Literature,” in Kumar, 147–64.
- 8 The historical references here are to Gandhi’s 1930 Salt March to Dandi; to Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt’s 1929 bombing of the Central Legislative Assembly to protest the ordinance stating that the Defence of India Act was being passed by the British in the interest of the Indian public; to Bhagat Singh’s execution in 1931 for the murder of J.P. Saunders, a Deputy Superintendent of Police; and to Gandhi’s raising of the Swaraj flag, which became the official flag of the All India Congress Committee in 1931.
- 9 In his influential book *Remembering Partition*, Pandey recalls the commonly held belief that “while the Hindus got their Hindustan and the Muslims got their Pakistan, the Sikhs were like orphans, left with nothing” (16–17).

- 10 This telling image comes from Bapsi Sidhwa's celebrated Partition-era novel *Cracking India*.
- 11 This partial borrowing from Stephen Dedalus' line "I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (Joyce 299) is also meant to liken *What the Body Remembers* to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as a cultural nationalist text.
- 12 Baldeosingh, Chairperson of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize panel that awarded *What the Body Remembers* the 2000 Commonwealth Writer's Prize for Best Book, Canada/Caribbean region, praises it as "one of the most important and original novels about Indian history," noting in particular its "versatility" of language, its poetic imagery, and its "complex tapestry that gives visibility to all the characters' stories while showing how they are all part of a larger canvas" (qtd. in Steininger).
- 13 For a related comment, as this observation applies in part to Singh Baldwin herself, see note 2 above.
- 14 Here Singh Baldwin can also be seen as drawing on and extending the myth of Sita and of the medieval Bhakti saint-singer Meerabai, focusing not so much on their self-sacrifice and non-violence as on their resistance and feminine strength. For an informative discussion of the postcolonial historical re-imagining of the hagiographical figures of Sita and Meerabai, see Chapter 4 in Kumar, pp. 125–46.
- 15 Elsewhere too, in a continuing ironic turn given the tensions between the Sikhs and Muslims and between the Sikhs and British in mid-century India, Singh Baldwin aligns Sardarji with the English and Satya with the Muslims. Writing about the allegorical dimension of *What the Body Remembers*, she proposes that Sardarji "causes the women's rivalry—in the same way as the British caused the conflicts between Muslims [here signified by Satya] and Hindus [here Roop] of colonial India—until the children, like the Sikhs, members of the offspring religion of Islam and Hinduism, are caught in the middle and Sardarji's house, like the country itself, must be divided because it can no longer be shared" ("Creative Tension").
- 16 Stories of such "martyrdom," which, according to Pandey "neglect to address the question of choice—of alternative possibilities and hopes of preserving life and honour," are recounted in the Shirmoni Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee reports compiled in Kirpal Singh's *Shabeedian* (1964) (cited in Pandey 194).
- 17 To Nupur Sinha's question about what inspired her to become a writer, Singh Baldwin responds broadly, "No one person—areas of silence and anger inspire me, oral stories inspire me." And in an interview with Rich Rennicks, she remarks, "Hybridity is the most desirable of all conditions, the one that offers us the experience of being truly human, but hybrid beings . . . are engaged in a very risky endeavor," constantly "forced" by dominant groups "to choose a single affiliation."

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- 18 Writing from a contemporary perspective, Singh Baldwin remains keenly aware of the discrimination encountered by her family and Sikhs more generally as she was growing up in Canada in the 1960s. *What the Body Remembers* is also written against the backdrop of the more insidious, immediate, and widespread Hindu brutality against Sikhs in India following the Congress government’s military attack on the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) and Indira Gandhi’s subsequent assassination by her Sikh bodyguards in 1986. Once again, as during Partition, Punjab was convulsed with violence, and tens of thousands of Sikhs lost their lives in the bloody decade that followed.
- 19 In response to Rennicks’ related question about a western reader’s potential objection to the extensive use of Punjabi and Urdu words and the lack of a glossary in the novel, Singh Baldwin notes that she wished to remain true to her characters, who are “products of their time, place and environment.” “That’s why,” she reiterates in another exchange, “there’s no glossary, no explaining, no italics for Indian words. They are not foreign. They are part and parcel of this universe” (qtd. in Methot).
- 20 Singh Baldwin cites two examples of Punjabi words that are “lost even to Indian speakers”: “we no longer have the ‘siapa’ mourning ceremony and the very word has changed meaning to mean ‘problem.’ We no longer use ‘saukan’ regularly because since 1956 when polygamy was outlawed, Punjabi-speaking Hindus and Sikhs no longer use the word that names the relationship between co-wives” (qtd. in Sinha).
- 21 The Japji Sahib, a set of verses composed by Guru Nanak, appears at the beginning of the Guru Granth Sahib.
- 22 Followed by the Sikh holy book, Singh Baldwin names as her inspiration Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, Erich Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*, Emerson’s *Essays*, Atwood’s *Surfacing* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and Joanna Field’s *On Not Being Able to Paint* in that order (“Shauna Singh Baldwin’s Most Influential Books”).
- 23 Here Methot is borrowing from Singh Baldwin’s comments on language usage in her “Author Essay”: “To write outside the system of Judeo-Christian symbols is to go to places where English is insufficient. . . . For Indian characters, I needed to use Indian metaphors and Indian symbols.”

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