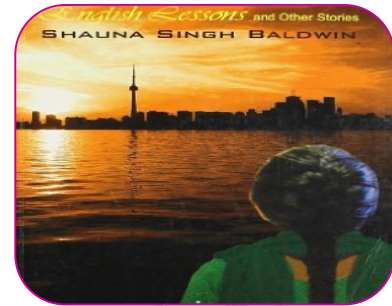




STRUGGLES OF SIKH WOMEN IN SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S ENGLISH LESSONS AND OTHER STORIES



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ABSTRACT

Shauna Singh Baldwin's English Lessons and Other Stories focuses on the predicament of previously neglected Sikh women under Sikh masculinity by mapping onto the wider historical contexts of immigration to North America and globalization and consumerism in India. Baldwin reveals the complicated textures of the lives of South Asian women in all their absurdities and painful truths. She is adept at entering the minds of her characters to reveal the different ways her protagonists think about the traditional and ethical values and the ways they act on their own choices. Baldwin writes first for radio, giving them the immediacy of a conversation with a restrained passion which describes the friction between the East and West and the traditional and modern. While never sentimentalizing or overplaying the emotion, her stories provide some of the inside stories for the Diaspora and also account of the rising awareness and strength of women who must tap their own minds and hearts to enter the new worlds, both emotional and material.

KEYWORDS: : Diaspora, migration, identity, feminism, subordinate, tradition, ethical values, ethnic minority, voiceless and frustration.

INTRODUCTION

Baldwin's heroines are merely ordinary women who find their courage in the most paradoxical places. Susan Chacko comments in his review of this collection of short stories with following lines: "*English Lessons and other stories*" is Shauna Singh Baldwin's second book, a collection of fifteen short stories that revolve around Sikh women in three different countries -- India, Canada, and the United States. They range from a 10-year-old girl in Indian Punjab, through mothers whose children are studying abroad, to young immigrants in Canada and the US, to an elderly lady in a retirement home in Canada." (Chacko, www.sawnet.org)

The story "Rawalpindi 1919" presents the predicament of a mother, a Sikh woman whose son is migrating to Europe for three years to pursue higher education. Her husband loves the chapatti she prepares with love. She follows the traditions of not uttering the name of husband and covering head with chunni in front of husband. She is a caring and loving mother who always thinks of her sons. Her elder son is a poet, a gentle and kind but not a businessman and the younger one Sarup is worldlier. She worries about his marriage: "Twenty-one years old and Choudhary Sahib had found no bride worthy of him-yet." (*English Lessons*, 11) While cooking Sardarni Sahib thinks about her son's encounters in his migration to England. She expects that her son will not change when he returns from Europe: " ...her boy could go to Vilayat, to the white people's country, to learn from their gurus in their dark and cloudy cities – her youngest – and then return to Rawalpindi, and his people would know no difference." (*English Lessons*, 11) She imagines how he will live in England where he will need enough turbans to keep his Sikh identity. Her husband washes his hands after shake-hand with a British man; and now her son is going to live among English boys and will

pollute his hands. She also cares for the food he will have to eat in England - 'only boiled food with not a single chilli all the time' – to which Sarup would never become used to.

Her son studies in Imperial College and reads *Thelma*, a love story written by a woman called Marri Corilli. Sardarni sahib does not believe that a woman writing herself a fat book. She thinks: "*But maybe she was a poor woman who could not afford to get a munshi to write down her thoughts.*" (*English Lessons*; 13) At the end of the story, she demands her husband to buy chairs and plates in the house when her son returns from England.

"Montreal 1962" presents the predicament of a Sikh wife living with her husband in Canada where her husband is asked to take off his turban and cut hair short to have the job. These turbans carry so much cultural and religious affiliation and affection in the life of a Sikh woman. They stand as a symbol of their tradition. She has never seen her father, her brother and her husband without a turban. But, these turbans appear to be bed sheets or curtains to the Canadian dry-cleaner woman without eyebrows. The Canadians expect and compel her husband to sacrifice his cultural identity and tradition to suite the new world: "*You must be reborn white-skinned – to survive.*" (*English Lessons*, 15)

The detailed description of the process of washing, drying, folding and wearing the turbans focuses on the love and attachment a Sikh woman has with them. It carries a strong cultural significance for the Sikh community. For the protagonist the red colour of a turban stands for the blood of the Sikh martyrs: "*I unfurled the gauzy scarlet on our bed and it seemed as though I'd poured a pool of the sainted blood of all the Sikh martyrs there.*" (*English Lessons*, 17) When the woman protagonist ties the turban to her head, it reminds her of the cultural heritage of her community: "*In the mirror I saw my father as he must have looked as a boy, my teenage brother as I remember him, you as you face Canada, myself as I need to be.*" (*English Lessons*, 18) She wishes her husband not to lose the traditional and cultural identity before the Canadians who do not know what it takes for wear a turban for the Sikhs. She declares: "*And so, my love, I will not let you cut your strong rope of hair and go without a turban into this land of strangers. The knot my father tied between my chunni and your turban is still strong between us, and it shall not fail you now. My hands will tie a turban every day upon your head and work so we can keep it there. One day our children will say, "My father came to this country with very little but his turban and my mother learned to work because no one would hire him."*" (*English Lessons*, 18)

"Family Ties" focuses on the predicament of a girl in the Sikh family who feels discriminated by her parents and searches for the reasons for the same. It focuses on the three women, the girl narrator, her mother and her aunt. Her mother calls her fatty. Her mother is mad after imported things and always quarrels with her husband over matter of extra money. She wishes him to get the posting at Delhi: "*They are fighting again over money. Always money. She says Dad should be like every other government employee—take a favour here, a perk there, a bribe here, have a little consideration for his family. Try to get a Delhi posting- she says it's the only place a government servant can make better money.*" (*English Lessons*, 26) The only reason that she marries him is that he has not asked for dowry. She likes the Chinese hairdresser girl, the French brands and even orders the cook to make the Western food. Her daughter is recommended glasses and she worries about her marriage. She discourages her daughter by saying: "*How will anyone marry you now, you ungrateful child.*" (*English Lessons*, 38) Her daughter's low vision is a family tie as Chandani, her innocent Aunt who is raped by Muslims at time of the partition and has drawn her child as if she suffers from low sight. The narrator's mother gives her son more and more pocket money and when she comes to know that he is addicted and almost mad, she repents: "*My only son. What have I not given him? He doesn't talk properly anymore.... Who will look after me when I get old?*" (*English Lessons*, 39) The madness her son carries is also the family tie as Chandani is also mad when her brother denies taking her back to his house.

Her father is always haunted by the past memories of the partition period. He trains her brother at shooting by a revolver. He considers the possibility of the war with Pakistan. He advises his son: "*Beta, I don't know if you will ever need this. But there is a war now, and I want you to know how to use it to defend this little kukri.*" (*English Lessons*, 28) At another time again he guides his son: "*If the Muslims come and your sister is in danger, you must shoot her rather than let her fall into their hands.*" (*English Lessons*, 28) She is

shocked at the teaching of her father to her brother regarding the treatment to her in the danger. The little daughter of ten feels like a kukri: *"My breath comes fast when I hear this, and feel his hand on my head like the kukri must have felt the chicken-seller's pudgy gentle hand reaching into her cage."* (English Lessons, 28) Later, when she comes to know about her brother's smoking cigarettes, he threatens her not to tell father about it. Otherwise he will kill her. He says: *"If you try it, you'd be dead."* (English Lessons, 34) He is told that she belongs to him and he has power to wish her life or death. Her parents wish to send her brother to the University of Toronto, Canada for the higher education. On the other hand she is sent for schooling to Miss Shafi, a Muslim woman left behind by her relative who went to Pakistan after partition. She is asked to use shampoo every two days to make her hair thick so that someone will marry her. Her mother brings a contraption for her to swing against every day and try to grow taller. She wears her Mummy's old salwar kameezes altered to her size. All these facts expose how a girl is discriminated and a boy is favoured in the Indian families.

Against the pride and honour of the family and religion, the lives of daughters and sisters have no values. The predicament of the aunt of the narrator brings to the focus the facts during the partition of India. Her eighteen years old aunt Chandani Kaur is abducted by the Muslims during the partition period in 1947 and she has a son after being raped by Muslim. She survives as Jehanara Begum. However, when fond by the social workers, her brother says: *"...his sister was dead and he was sorry for her troubles."* (English Lessons, 33) She thinks that her son is the obstacle and she kills her own son with her hands. Nand Singh, a servant of the family, tells the narrator: *"Then again this Jehanara Begum wrote to your father, saying the baby was gone now and again asking to be taken back."* (English Lessons, 33) The sacrifice of her own son does not come to her rescue and she goes mad.

In "Simran" Baldwin presents the predicament of a mother and her daughter. The story acquaints with Amrit, an India mother caring for her daughter returning from America after four months. She is a teacher and is worried about her nineteen-year-old unmarried daughter. Her daughter Simran studies hard. She follows her mother's advice to stay clear of Americans and not to make friends with other foreign students while studying in the States. Amrit is of the opinions that Americans do everything themselves and they spoil the servants. She thinks that America teaches her daughter to lie to her parents. When she sees a copy of Koran in Simran's bag, she feels ruined by her daughter: *"Veeru is even old enough to remember the sight of Sikh women, raped and disgraced by Muslims, walking home to Amritsar. And my daughter comes back from America with a copy of Koran? I don't know what is in it- I only know it is the book that gave its believers permission to kill us."* (English Lessons, 50) She feels that her daughter has completely lost the Sikh culture: *"Even her limbs imitated American discipline; her gestures were wider, and when she wore a sari I was dismayed that she no longer walked with graceful glide, but strode as firmly as any shameless blonde woman. For this I sent her to America?"* (English Lessons, 50) The family spends fifteen thousand dollars on the daughter's foreign education and bears the dire predictions of friends. And to their surprise, their daughter becomes: *"...a monster, an ungraceful, rebellious, selfish monster."* (English Lessons, 57) A caring mother Amrit feels that she has to protect her daughter's reputation.

When a Muslim boy named Mirza tries again and again to contact Simran in India from America on telephone, Amrit feels confirmed that her daughter has a love affair with him in America. At first the copy of Koran and now the frequent phone calls at night times lead her suspicions to turn in to confirmation. Amrit doubts even her daughter's virginity: *"I even began to worry if she was still virgin."* (English Lessons, 63) In fact, Simran has no such relationship with Mirza. They are just friends; no matter he is in love with her. But Simran becomes a prey to her parents' suspicious nature and fears of possible disgrace if their daughter loves and marries a Muslim. They decide not to send her again to America where her lover and their enemy is waiting for her. An innocent young girl's opportunity of having higher education in America is sacrificed due to the age old dislike and rivalry between the Sikh and Muslim communities. On the other hand, a true love of Mirza is also sacrificed due to the same.

"Toronto 1984" focuses again on the predicament of a mother Bibiji and her daughter Piya. They are living in Canada. Piya works in a Canadian multinational company which forbids her to wear salwar kameez.

She feels that she has ethnic individualism in her earrings. She is very patriotic young woman who denies standing in praise of the British Queen in the party. She says: *"My face flamed red. I finally understand what they wanted me to do. They wanted me to stand and toast the British Queen, the symbol of the empire my grandfather fought against for independence, the one whose line had send my grandfather to prison."* (English Lessons, 69) After this incident her Chinese-South African colleague suggests that she must work hard to save from the rage of her boss. Her boss belittles her by saying: *"I would never have hired you if I had known you are a damn Paki."* (English Lessons, 70) But she feels her pride in Indianness betrayed when her trip to motherland is cancelled because of Indira Gandhi's murder in India.

Bibiji is a widow living with her son and daughter in Canada. She worries about her daughter Piya. She always advises her son to think of Piya's marriage: *"But now I don't like this too-much freedom. I'm telling you something bad will happen."* (English Lessons, 68) She thinks that it is a duty of her son to find a match for his sister. She is a caring mother worried about her children. She demands at her son: *"So tell your boss you have to get your sister married, he will give time-off; are you not the foreman? And when have you ever taken time-off? That was because you were sick. Tell him two weeks. It is very important."* (English Lessons, 70) The Congress workers take her son to sterilization camp to make an operation before he has a chance to father a son. It is not the mother who heads the family after death of her husband; the son takes his father's place. It is clear in the conversation between Bibiji and Piya: *"It's all settled. You will come with us. Bhaiya has said so, and I am asking you to be a good girl and listen to his wishes. If your father was here, he would tell you for me – but what can I do, one poor foolish widow."* (English Lessons, 72) She wishes her children not to become too much Canadian.

"English Lessons" presents the predicament of Indian woman married to an American, who takes her to the States just to become a prostitute and a source of his earnings. Kanwaljit is an Indian woman married to an American named Tony and comes in the States to 'live like a worm avoiding sunlight'. They have a son named Suryavir. She lives underground as her green card has not come. She is prohibited to meet any Indian there. He compels her to dress in pants so that she looks like Mexican and though she is his wife, he introduces her as his girlfriend to others. He wishes her to speak English to pass her immigration interview and to memorize her amnesty story. She totally changes and wants to erase her past identity. She says: *"I told Valerie I will change my name. I asked her to call me Kelly. No one here can say Kanwaljit. And Kanwaljit is left away in Amritsar, before the fire."* (English Lessons, 141) She thinks that if she returns to her father, it might be a disgrace and shame for her Indian family.

She is threatened of reporting to the immigration office by another American woman who has an affair with Tony. They live together for two years. She shares bed with Tony. Tony pays the same woman their life savings for a marriage certificate. Because of this woman, Kanwaljit comes to live with Tony in America. Kanwaljit asks her English teacher how to say: *"Is not two years of our life enough? Is not my worm existence, my unacknowledged wifehood, enough for you? Enough that I call myself his girlfriend, my son his bastard?"* (English Lessons, 141) Tony shares Kanwaljit with another American man who has the immigration forms in his hands. The man frequently blackmails her. Kanwaljit confesses: *"He looks like Tony, only younger. And he still laughs at me, waving pictures of Tony with her. Telling me Tony left me for an untouchable, a hubshi. Threatening to tell my parents if I would not open my legs to him. I did. Rubba-merey. I did."* (English Lessons, 142) Tony warns Mrs. Keogh, the English teacher, not to teach Kanwaljit more than she knows, but just enough for her to get a good-paying job at Dunkin' Donuts or maybe Holiday Inn. He warns Mrs. Keogh: *"She will learn quickly, but you must not teach her too many American ideas."* (English Lessons, 143)

Baldwin in her Keynote speech delivered at the Great Lakes Writer's Conference declares: *"In it, I began to move past my lived experience and personal problems to enter the earliest form of role-playing-game, the virtual reality game that predates computers: the world of fiction."* (Baldwin, 1998) To conclude one should agree with the praise for the book on her website, which states: *"In 15 insightful but mostly sad stories, Baldwin examines the bruises and wounds endured by immigrant Sikhs learning how to live in English-speaking North America... Baldwin writes with seeming ease about life in both North America and*

India. She devotes loving attention to details of tradition and culture... They are both emotionally and politically loaded, both sweet and sour... English Lessons is a fascinating collection rich in cultural insight. These are life lessons worth sharing." (Edmonton Journal)

Baldwin's stories in *English Lessons and Other Short Stories* capture attention through the details of tradition and culture and imagery. In the stories all the details are purposeful. These stories provide views of characters from different generations and social spheres, their positions and postures. Baldwin examines the bruises and wounds endured by immigrant Sikhs while learning how to live in immigration. These are truth delivering, emotional, sweet and sour stories. The family, place and politics are rendered like precious intaglios. Baldwin's story is a metaphor of life, family and universal values. To understand the meanings intended through the metaphor, the reader must be attentive to the cultural nuances. Baldwin portrays the Indian collectivist cultural values contrasting to the individualistic values of the West. Baldwin shows that traditionally woman has to learn to keep silence. The women who don't comply with traditional modes of living are severely punished. The women are sometimes simple, but show that every person has unique and extraordinary qualities. Baldwin has a good measure of compassion for the characters, especially the women she depicts in her complex and multi-layered stories, as a lesson in good literature. She shows the compassion, empathy and the love of a housekeeper for her dead mistress who was treated badly by her greedy son and daughter-in-law. In her Keynote speech delivered at Writer's Conference, she confesses: "*I have learned from writing that the distinction is irrelevant. Writers don't write because some of us live outside India where writing is magically elevated to the status of "literature." Writers, whether we use narrative or not, write because it helps us make sense of the world, contribute to it, rail at it with a non-violent socially-acceptable weapon -- language.*" (Baldwin; 1998)

In this collection Baldwin brings several interrelated issues of race, gender, ethnicity and immigration by interpreting and evaluating the experiences particularly of the immigrant Indian Sikhs. These stories present concerns of the Asian, American, black, Eastern, ethnic, immigrant, minority, diasporic, hyphenated, hybrid, inferior, subaltern, other, refugee, outsider, expatriate and many more people in the world. Nevertheless, besides the identity of immigrants, it focuses on the life and the predicament of Asian Diasporas in the Western world. Baldwin declares her purpose of writing in the same speech. She says: "*I also had to find an acceptable answer to the question -- for whom do you write? I'm a hybrid of three cultures, Indian, Canadian and American and I write from the perspective of all three. Today my answer is: I write for the people I love, a hybrid, global audience, for people interested in the process of becoming human, the ways in which we live, the influence of history, philosophy, culture, tradition and memory on our sense of self.*" (Baldwin; 1998)

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