



THE DIASPORIC FRICTION BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST IN SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT:

Shauna Singh Baldwin is a writer of short fiction, poetry, novels and essays. Baldwin is an Indo-Canadian author who presently lives in Milwaukee, the USA. She is an award winning writer and the author of several books including famous novel What the Body Remembers. She is honest about her characters and she compels the readers to think about the world in which they live or the parts of ignored past.

KEYWORDS: *Diaspora, migration, politics, identity, feminism, subordinate, ethnic minority, voiceless and frustration.*

INTRODUCTION:

Baldwin's *English Lessons and Other Stories* (1996) passionately dramatizes the predicament of Indian women who expand their world from India to Canada and North America and from the closed circle of the family to the wilderness of the office and university. Baldwin examines the bruises and wounds endured by the immigrant ethnic minority while learning how to live in English-speaking culture both in North America and in India. About the role of a fiction writer, Baldwin in an interview to Lindsay Pereira declares:

Fiction writers continue to play the role we have always played -- we tell the lies that tell the truth. I find it's the paradox of my life as a writer that if I yearn for tolerance, I have to write about the effects of intolerance. To demand justice, I find I must explore injustice. And if I yearn for the return of liberal secular individualism I have to engage with and examine Fascism, Fundamentalism and other forms of group-think. (Baldwin, 2005)

The Diasporic friction between the East and the West as well as in the traditional and modern causes the rise in the awareness and strength of the women. The ordinary women find their courage while tapping their own minds and hearts to enter the new emotional and material worlds. In her keynote speech delivered at the Great Lakes Writer's Conference Baldwin states:

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)

Baldwin's *The Tiger Claw* is based on the life and the predicament of Noor Inayat Khan who was an enigmatic woman fought against the Nazism in the German occupied France. Baldwin's research in the history and politics at the time of First World War and the dangers of tribal intolerances enlightens contemporary readers who are embroiled in their own disputes. It presents a story of a woman's extraordinary love, courage and espionage along with her search for identity in a multi-faceted world. It

is a thriller story of a woman's displacement after her father's death and the cultural tension due to racism, miscegenation, sexism, cosmopolitanism and the evils of betrayal and hypocrisy in war and imperialism. Noor Khan succeeds to escape from her family's religious literalism and ideas on feminine propriety and wins her cross-cultural love for a Jewish named Armand, from whom she conceived the child and then aborted. She shifts to England and volunteers to serve for a special intelligence English agency which trains her and sends her back to the Occupied France. Her personal secret mission to reunite with her lover Armand encourages her, but she is eventually captured, imprisoned and executed. It is an affectionate story of the moral complexity, inner conflict, dislocation and exile of a very courageous woman whose love is lost amidst the turbulence of the war.

Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* focuses on the predicament of a woman who fails to bear a child and a young girl whose polygamous marriage turns her to the status of a second-wife. The girl believes in friendship with her co-wife but there develops a very complex relationship between the old and the young woman while their husband struggles to find his place amidst the drastic changes when India lurches toward independence. The novel records the longings, losses and compromises between cultures, ideologies and religions. It lyrically describes the cinnamon, anise and fennel smells in a woman's kitchen. They speak for the psyche and lore of a community in which the power again and again shifts between the women. A woman's emotional ancient heart is presented with full of love, jealousy, infertility and religious fury. Exceptionally, the novel filters through a Sikh woman's perspective during the wrenching period of the partition when the personal became the political. This woman's perspective is valuable as women suffer most when their homes are uprooted; the grueling uses to which women's bodies and spirits are put and their abuses at the hands of men. It pictures a complex and cruel society built around the plight of second-class Indian women through sensitive portrayal of the condition of women in the Indian sub-continent without the stridency of feminism. It also presents a complex and cruel society in which the Sikh women are practically voiceless within their own culture and considered secondary. It dramatizes the plight of Indian women with great sympathy and love.

Baldwin's *We are not in Pakistan* presents predicament of women facing the cultural convulsions and racial terrorism while migrating from Central America to the American South and from Metro Toronto to the Ukraine. Baldwin's wide-ranging voices and international locations, as stories happen in Canada and America, provide an opportunity to comment upon the enforcement of immigration policies.

In a Speech at Montreal Shauna Singh Baldwin states about her belonging to the category of the writers:

I began calling myself a diasporic Indian writer in 1996 when my first book of fiction, English Lessons and Other Stories, was published. I was in a category of one at the time, and even when What the Body Remembers was published in 1999, I got puzzled looks from journalists on each continent at my self-description. But as you see today, there is now recognition and acknowledgment that the Indian diaspora exists and that some of us are scribes. (Baldwin, 2003)

In *The Tiger Claw* the predicament of a woman is too close to reality as it is based on a real woman Noor Khan. She was a Muslim Indian who volunteered as a radio operator for Churchill's Special Operations Executive and was dropped behind Nazi lines in the Occupied France in 1943. She was born to an Indian immigrant man, a Sufi aristocrat, musician, teacher and an American woman related to the founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy. The young, brave and daring Noor Khan was born in Moscow, raised in Paris and lived in London from the start of the war and aliasing Norah Baker, Jeanne-Marie Regnier, codenamed Madeleine and was eventually caught by the SS and executed at Dachau because her radio transmissions from inside the Occupied Europe provided vital information that aided the Allied Forces for their successful Normandy landings. She was a writer of children and posthumously was awarded the George Cross by the British Government and the Croix de Guerre by the French Government for the exemplary services she rendered to the Allied Forces during the World War II.

Baldwin portrays Noor as heroic and there can be no doubt of the young woman's courage and determination, even if her judgment may have been false. The readers come to know from the beginning that Noor will end up imprisoned. How she is caught? Who betrays her? Will she ever be released? Will Kabir find her? Will she and Armand be reunited? These questions are sustaining and maintaining the interest as Baldwin paces the story like a nail-biting thriller, revealing only a little bit at a time. To conclude one must agree with Shashi Tharoor who in advance praises the novel as:

A deeply felt, richly evocative novel that resurrects and reinvents a remarkable life, The Tiger Claw tells an affecting story of love and loss amidst the turbulence of war and human dislocation. It confirms Shauna Singh Baldwin as a major literary voice that transcends the borders that divide human experience. (Tharoor, on her website)

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. Her heroines are merely ordinary women who find their courage in the most paradoxical places.

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