

Identity as a New Specific Voice in Shauna Singh Baldwin's "Toronto 1984" and "The Insult"

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ABSTRACT

Shauna Singh Baldwin is a renowned Canadian-American award-winning author who celebrates her hybridity in her writings. She has written various works for the magazines, newspapers and anthologies. She is the most prominent writer of present time who frankly reflects the spiritual variance of Indian society. Her works have multicultural characters and a surfeit of words from varied languages. She represents the quest of identity, displacement, isolation, belongingness and gender discrimination in the society through the activist and confident attitude of her female characters. Being a Sikh, she not only reveals her Sikh culture and community in her works but also presents a variety of themes regarding diasporic receptivity. She depicts the unification of western world in the Indian society where women are sexually exploited and ill-treated by the men of the society. Being an immigrant Baldwin explores bitter experiences, intricacies, struggles and sufferings of the diaspora, especially in the lives of women. The milieu of Baldwin's writings mainly focuses on the hybrid culture of Indian and Canadian community. Her two famous short story collections are entitled as English Lessons and Other Stories (1996) and We Are Not In Pakistan (2007). Her well-known collection English Lessons and Other Stories (1996) has fifteen remarkable stories which give voice to a variety of experiences of Indian women about migration and identity

crisis at the time of partition. In this research paper for examining the key point of identity in the lives of women, two stories from the collection English Lessons and Other Stories have been selected entitled as, "Toronto 1984" and "The Insult". Baldwin tries to unify the condition of immigrants with the life of her characters which makes her writing very impressive and unique.

The present paper is an attempt to portray the painful experiences and efforts of women in a male dominated patriarchal society. It will also present the remote setting of office and family in the lives of Indian women where they strive to seek and maintain their identity in a foreign land.

Key words: *hybridity, migration, patriarchal, remote, displacement, isolation, belongingness.*

Introduction:

Diasporic Literature is a very vast concept in which many writers have given their contribution by their literary works and have become mainstream contributors to global literature. They live outside but efficiently write about their native country, culture and background. The diasporic literature is fascinating, but it is equally complex and unique. Many writers got recognition initially as the proponents of a new genre belonging exclusively to overseas Indians. But today, many writers have come of age and get counted without their identity as migrants with their feeling of estrangement with both the homeland and the host countries. Shauna Singh Baldwin is a famous diasporic writer of Indian descent. She considerably depicts the emotions, dilemmas, perspectives, dislocation, identity crisis, homesickness and loss etc. related to the issues of women. She is a keen observer of the clashes of identity and cultural disparity as she is herself a product of three cultures, Indian, American and Canadian. Shauna Singh Baldwin is a famous international recognition writer who has made her place in the English literary scene because of her vivacious and compelling voice by which she compels the readers to think about the present world and the ignored past.

Discussion:

The story “Toronto 1984” is about an Indian immigrant mother Bibiji, a widow and her young daughter Piya who are dislocated from their native land and living in Canada. They feel disenchanting there because of their affinity towards Indian culture and roots. Identity plays a very important role in their lives as they attempt to uphold their Indian identities even among the Canadians. They struggle for it but become victims of the racial discrimination in Canada. The female protagonist of the story Piya has to face cultural clash in a Canadian multinational company where she works. Being an Indian she feels isolated there but at the same time she retains her individuality by wearing Indian clothes the ‘salwar kameez’ and the earrings though she is prohibited to do so. Her mother Bibiji is an immigrant Indian woman who does not want to make her children totally Canadian. She always thinks about the marriage and future of her daughter Piya so she suggests her son to think about it, “But now I don’t like this too-much freedom. I’m telling you something bad will happen” (Baldwin 58).

Piya works in an alien culture but she never feels ashamed at her ethnicity and patriotic nature of India. She was much influenced by her grandfather who has fought for the independence and has also gone to prison. Keeping in her mind about her grandfather’s sacrifice and patriotism, Piya does not agree to stand in the praise of the British Queen, the symbol of the empire, in the party. She states her opinion in these words:

My face flamed red. I finally understood what they wanted me to do. They wanted me to stand and toast the British Queen, the symbol of the empire my grandfathers fought against for independence, the one whose line had sent my grandfathers to prison. (Baldwin 59)

This incident was not liked by her boss and due to this after some time she has to face the wrath of her boss. She also has to endure the insult of her boss who used to call her ‘a damn Paki’ which is like an abuse in some way or other. He says to her, “I would never have hired you if I had known you were a damn Paki” (Baldwin 60).

At this Piya's Chinese-South African colleague advises her to work hard in the office so that she could be saved from the rage of her boss. But in sustaining her Indian identity in an alien culture, she experiences disruption and disenchantment. Besides, her spirit lets down when her trip to the motherland is cancelled as a consequence of Indira Gandhi's murder in India. In spite of all this she feels pride in her Indian roots and identity. On the other hand, Piya's mother wants her children to be Indian even in Canadian culture. Because of her caring nature, she always concerned about her children and wants a suitable match for her daughter and reminds about it to 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" (Baldwin 70).

In the story Baldwin also shows gender disparity where a male is always the head of the family although he is a son. The mother is not given importance even after the death of her husband because the son takes his father's place in the family as it is clear by 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" (Baldwin 62). Besides this, the author also portrays the theme of marriage and homesickness as the diasporic people want the finest job, success and safe future for their children in the settled country but at the same time they have a preference to find a groom or bride for their child from the home left behind. As in the story Bibiji suggests her son that he should search the groom for his sister from their community and the boy who "is still a good boy. Not too much gone to his head. You know, not become too Canadian" (Baldwin 63). Moreover, Shauna Singh Baldwin indirectly tries to reveal the love for her home which is left behind through the assassination of the Prime Minister of that time Indira Gandhi.

Thus in the story the female protagonist Piya is an amalgamation of hybridity but she retrieves her cultural identity even in the Canadian way of life. Being revolutionary in nature she also tries to come out from the conservative mindset of the society by breaking the norms of the society. For this very reason her mother wishes to control her by arranging a marriage and keep her in the female role. Here Piya represents the 'quest for identity' as she earlier tries to imitate each and every aspect of Canadian culture but later she redeploys her cultural roots and feels pride at her Indian heritage and ethnicity.

The story "The Insult" is also about identity crisis in an alien land which is revealed by the two immigrant Sikh sisters living in America. They have not a good relationship between them because one sister has almost lost her roots in the process of following American lifestyle whereas the other sister tries to retain her Indian identity and culture in America all the time. The story is narrated by Neelu, the daughter of one of the sisters. Aunty Nimmi, the sister of Neelu's mother, thinks also in an American way which was not liked by her sister, Neelu's mother. Aunty Nimmi works in a dentist's office and was much influenced by the modern western living. Her husband Uncle Harjit is also quite an American in his standard of living and attitude. They have three sons who have antipathy towards India because of its messiness and populace. As Aunty Nimmi tells about it to Neelu's family that she is thinking to go to India but she will go without her sons as they have an aversion to India, "Nahinji – they don't like India. They say it's too dirty and has too many people" (Baldwin 146). Neelu's family doesn't feel good at her assertion like this, while Neelu's mother wishes her sister to find a suitable boy for Neelu from India as she is going there.

Aunty Nimmi is not much concerned about her lost identity that is why she says that Neelu should find her partner on her own like the American girls of present time. And if she finds anyone in America, her family don't have to give dowry for doing this. She doesn't take it seriously though it is related with Neelu's marriage, she states, "Girls find their own

partners now-days. Neelu is an American girl – you won't even have to give her a dowry if she finds a fellow here" (Baldwin 146). Neelu's mother feels hurt at her sister's opinion regarding her daughter's marriage as it can bring shame for the family. The family of Neelu has a desire to find a nice Sikh boy for her in America who keeps her identity by wearing a turban in this strange land. They also try to find a boy from a good Sikh family from India but fail in their attempts. Neelu's mother feels the insult by the words of her sister and retorts her that it is not considered good in their society that a girl of a decent family should choose her groom on her own. Besides, they have not given permission to Neelu for dating with the boys. Neelu's family find many Sikh boys in America but they all are unable to sustain their identity in a foreign land. The reason behind it was that in order to make more money they have cut their hair and don't wear the turbans. In this way they are distant from their Indian roots but the family of Neelu are unable to accept it.

On the other hand Aunty Nimmi does not search any good boy for Neelu from Indian Sikh family. That is why Neelu's mother arranges a marriage for her daughter to a 'good Sikh fellow' from Delhi without turban and she doesn't invite her sister at the wedding of her daughter. It is so as she wants to insult her sister's reputation and take some kind of vengeance for her cynicism. Because of this behaviour of her sister, Aunty Nimmi realizes her fault afterwards and thinks that Neelu's mother should ask the help from her husband in selling their house. Neelu's mother also feels it and gives Aunty Nimmi the honour of giving name to the baby at the time of naming ceremony of Neelu's baby. At last in the story both the sisters' Sikh families change themselves according to the American culture and again come together by forgetting the insults for each other.

Thus in the story the expatriate families have to face many ups and downs in an alien country like America. Through the character of Neelu's mother, Baldwin attempts to reflect the struggle of immigrant Sikh community who finds it hard to sustain their culture in

America and due to this some of them have accepted the American customs. And later on the adoption of American customs creates the sense of lost Indian identity and honour among them.

Research Methodology-

In order to complete the objectives of proposed research paper, the following research methodology is employed:

- 1 The essential information is achieved from primary sources i.e. select short stories “Toronto 1984” and “The Insult” from *English Lessons and Other Stories* written by Shauna Singh Baldwin.
- 2 Descriptive qualitative approach is used as a method to analyse the characters, situation and theme of the select stories.
- 3 Some secondary sources like critical books on Shauna Singh Baldwin, articles in the scholarly journals, anthologies, interviews and internet sources etc. are also used for reaching the significant outcome.
- 4 To organize the research paper reasonably the support from the 8th edition of *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Paper* is also taken all through it.

Conclusion:

Therefore ‘identity’ is an underlining theme of the two stories “Toronto 1984” and “The Insult”. Shauna Singh Baldwin has presented this theme as a major concern of her writing and offered it from multiple angles of diaspora. Being a powerful voice to the women of India, Baldwin depicts their experiences of homesickness, marginalization, dislocation, isolation and identity crisis in the distant land. The characters of these stories suffer from internal strife and psychological struggle caused by the dominance of tradition and patriarchy. Both the stories explicate homesickness, dislocation, identity crisis and cultural difference in the lives of expatriates, particularly women characters. The female protagonists

of the two stories appear as bold women who struggle vigorously for sustaining their Indian identity, equality and space even in a foreign land. It is evident from the two stories that the women characters belong to the expatriate Sikh community and try to preserve their tradition and culture among the foreigners. They are treated as other but at the same time they assert their identity, liberty, rights and status in the ruling ambience of their family as well as country. Thus Baldwin represents a sense of consciousness to the homeland along with the trauma of displacement and identity in the lives of immigrants in following their culture, customs and traditions.

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