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Dislocation, Displacement and Immigrant experience in the Short Stories of Shauna Singh
Baldwin

Abstract: The Indian Diaspora is a wonderful place to write from, and I am lucky to be a part of it-Kiran Desai

Indian Women writers like Kiran Desai, Bharti Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri all are dealing with the issues of Diasporic Consciousness, dislocation, displacement and immigrant experiences in their writings. Shauna Singh Baldwin, a Canadian-American writer of Indian origin is one of the most significant writers of Indian diaspora writing experiences of Sikh community during partition of Indian and its aftermath. In molding the personality of Shauna Singh Baldwin, the concept of nation, home and belongingness to the place of origin finds an important role. She has adopted and assimilated the elements of both home and host cultures and that is clearly revealed through her writings. As she says: "I wrote because I needed to make sense of my world by describing it. Eventually the stories weren't about me and my experience, but about situations, problems, feelings, metaphors and images that just refuse to go away."

The present paper focuses on a study of Shauna Singh Baldwin's short stories in relation to the Displacement, Dislocation and Immigrant experiences. Through her stories she describes

various struggles of Indian women immigrants after partition. Most of people migrated in the aftermath of the Partition and as a result their families suffered displacement and dislocation. She represents the experience of leading characters in three different settings -- India, USA and Canada. Baldwin unfolds the theme of cultural displacement and exile employing a variety of narrative strategies. Thus engaging with her short stories, this paper views her writing as a representation of cultural displacement, divided identity, quest for identity, home and belongingness.

Keywords: Partition, Diasporic Consciousness, Dislocation, Displacement, Identity

Introduction:

Shauna Singh Baldwin is a famous diasporic writer and a great voice of Indo-Canadian origin. In an interview with Tehelka when she was asked to comment on the fact that generally a writer of Indian origin is labeled everything from an Indo Anglian writer to an Immigrant Writer. She remarks:

“Labels are just organization tools. Any condescension implied, is the labeller’s

Characteristic problem, not mine. When you accept a label applied to you and stay

Within it, you limit yourself. So I like being in many categories. I’m an Immigrant

Writer in the US, a Canadian writer in Canada, a diasporic Indian writer in India, a

Woman writer in some circles, a literary fiction writer in others... One day I might

Get the best label of all – a human being who writes.” (Baldwin, 2004)

Shauna Singh Baldwin describes the immigrant experiences and the theme of dislocation and displacement in her collections of short stories. Shauna Singh's stories highlight how people got displaced because of partition and how immigrants are being targeted on each issue- from their clothing to their skin colour, from their food habits to their cultural life- everything has become a political issue. Politics of race, gender, colour and culture have entered under the skin of the host society. The story collections bring various issues into light: dilemma of migration; whether to migrate or not, the cultural shift, post migration issues, adaptation, alienation, identity crisis, politics reflected in diaspora communities, and many other issues are touched upon. Baldwin in her short story collection *We are not in Pakistan*, presents ten wonderful stories. World events such as 9/11, Chernobyl, and the Indian Partition share the stage with smaller-scale tragedies. Migrating from Central America to the American South, from Metro Toronto to the Ukraine, the story collection features an unforgettable cast of characters. Inhabitants of the 10 stories are male and female, young and old, rich and poor, likeable and hateful. They are Jewish, Christian, Sikh, American, Canadian, Pakistani, Costa Rican, Ukrainian, Mexican, and Greek. In "We are not in Pakistan" the grandmother always remembers her days in Pakistan and keeps on talking about her old days. She finds it very difficult to adjust in the foreign culture. On the other hand the granddaughter is perfectly fine with the alien culture and she hates her grandmother until her Pakistani grandmother disappears.

In *English Lessons and Other Stories* a number of stories move through time from the 60-ies to modern times with the various struggles of Indian Sikh immigrants after partition and how cultures misread each other. This story collection is a wonderful account of Punjabi immigrant experience in America and Canada. The author through her narrative art connects the reader into each character's life on an intimate level rather than only observing it casually. Most of the short stories are told from a female perspective.

Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a World literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of Migrants, the colonized or political refugees- these border and frontier conditions – maybe the terrains of world literature. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 11)

Baldwin represents women of India in various settings and provides an insight into the lives of Indian women in their own and in other cultures after immigration because of partition. She shows how due to partition people after being dislocated from their homeland, try to adapt to the foreign culture and how they search for self-identity. She examines the wounds endured by immigrant Sikhs during partition and discusses how as immigrants they cope with the new environment. The theme of dislocation and cultural displacement resonate throughout the text. The stories explore how courage and adaptability is necessary to maintain an Indian identity while living in some other country.

In Draupdi Ma grandfather feels a drastic change before partition in India and after partition while his stay in Canada as an immigrant. He finds a strong sense of cultural displacement. When Sukimama says to Darji to let him know the girl with whom he is going to get marry “I tell you, she may be a very nice girl, but I do not know her. It is not 1945 anymore, Darji, it is 1966.” Darji replies in a bold voice; did they addle your brain in Canada? You should have stayed in England, sir. The English understand these things.” (Baldwin, 1996, p. 13)

In “Rawalpindi 1919,” Baldwin shows how a mother thought about the changes they will require to make to their home when her son will return from England. She imagines her son will expect chairs to sit on, not cushions, and plates to eat from, not thalis. The mother recognizes and tries to accept these changes.

In “family ties” the narrative also talks about the effect of Partition on his father where he lost everything and even after being settled down in an alien country he never came out of that bad dream. He tells how his Dad, Dada and Dadi locked their haveli near Rawalpindi before the

Muslims came and how they fled on a death train and his only twenty-one-year-old father arrived in the new India because Nand Singh (driver) and his father used their turbans to rope themselves to the belly of the railcar and hid beneath it with a revolver as their only weapon while Dada and Dadi's screams filled the mad swirling darkness. He says

“I know Dad is thinking of his parents when he wanders off to a quiet spot, takes off his shoes, sits cross-legged before the Granth Sahib and says the words of the Gurus, chanting low. I stand behind him keeping the flies away with his special silver-handled yak's-hair tail, white and rough as my Dada's beard might have been, and when he nods I turn the pages of the tome for him....Dad doesn't wear a saffron turban or carry a big kirpan. He isn't even as large as I remembered, and he looks a little worn.And all the time Inder asks, “Aren't you going to be in the war?” “No,” Dad replies. “I lost enough in '47.” (Baldwin, 1996, p. 15)

The story “Devika” shows one woman's fight to adapt from Indian life to Canadian life. She struggles a lot to adapt to Canadian life style and she needed her family support:

“She wanted her mother, her father, and at least twenty solicitous relatives telling her what to do, how to do it, how to live, how to be good, how to be loved.” In order to remove her feelings of intense loneliness, Devika invents Asha, an imaginary friend who takes the shape of her best friend back in India. Devika is a modest, simple and respectful woman. She possesses all the traditional values and qualities of an Indian woman. Asha on the other hand has already adapted the foreign life style with her cigarettes and mini skirt. She is bold and strong-willed. She represents the western life style.

Devika's imaginary friend restores to the present a past version of her friend, the “wilful, Fun-loving, irreverent Asha, the one who'd sworn never to be married” (Baldwin, 1996, p. 156). Devika was in a dilemma and was trying to cope with double personality disorder. By

visualizing Asha, Devika also tries to show a difference between modern Canada and traditional India. “In Canada, [Devika] found it more difficult to sort the good girls from the bad ones. It is important to have both, because if there are no bad girls, how would anyone know that girls like Devika are good?” (Baldwin, 1996, p. 158).

In “Nothing Must Spoil this Visit” a mother feels the changes in generation because of western influences. She finds a cultural displacement and was worried to find a good wife for her son as she explains her choice in a wife for her son, “After all, I chose her because I saw from the start she would be an adjustable woman” (Baldwin, 1996, p. 121). According to her, there is a drastic cultural change and so, a “modern” woman should be adaptable to maintain her family’s reputation.

In “Simran” the mother of Simran is also feeling a cultural displacement when she realizes that it a copy of the Koran was lay cradled in her only daughter’s baggage. She was horrified. What her daughter exposed herself to in America? She remembers about her rich culture and talks about Partition pain:

We are a proud Sikh family and we have long memories. Our Gurus were tortured to death by Moghul rulers only three hundred years ago, and both Veeru’s father and mine still get tears in their eyes talking about the fate of old Sikh friends and neighbors at the hands of Muslim marauders during the 1947 partition. 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 the Koran? I don’t know what is in it — I only know it is the book that gave its believers permission to kill us.” (Baldwin, 1996, p. 29)

Conclusion

As an event of huge consequences, Partition still haunts the memories of people and retains its importance even today. Baldwin through her character shows how partition led people to redefine, rebuild and recover themselves forcing them against their will to resettle on a foreign land. Before Partition people belonging to different parts of the undivided country used to live as a closely-knit society. However, today the talk of partition brings images of bloodshed, loot, rape, abduction, decapitation of women by family male members in order to save their honour. A reader could grasp and understand the plight of women as to how women become the most sensitive lot during an armed conflict, how women overturn from being victims to activists if at they go through the text of *What the Body Remembers*, *We are not in Pakistan* and *English lessons* and other stories by Shauna Singh Baldwin. As SikhChic.com writes

—It's this urge to make people more understanding of cultures different from their own that lies at the heart of Shauna Singh's collection of short stories, *We are Not in Pakistan*...Every 2 story concerns someone who has moved from what they have been familiar with before, to coming to terms with their new situation.

The characters were displaced by Partition, and they got doubly-displaced when they immigrated to foreign lands. Thus the major theme in Shauna Singh Baldwin's short stories is a sense of consciousness to the homeland after settling in an alien land after partition. She not only describes the trauma of Partition and dislocation from the place of origin but also the problems of relocation to an alien place. Thus Baldwin beautifully represents the individuality of her characters through her varied writing styles and effectively presents that partition trauma and immigrants efforts to stick to and follow their culture, customs and traditions.

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Cover Story what the author remembers by Robin Roberts

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