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Original Research Paper



Feministic Analysis of Shauna Singh Baldwin's selected stories in *English Lessons and Other Stories*

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Abstract

The present paper aims at exploration of Shauna Singh Baldwin's specific technique implemented to present women predicament in selected stories from feministic point of view. The feministic point of view has developed out of a movement for equal rights and chances for women society. The present search is based on analytical and interpretative methods. Shauna Singh Baldwin is a writer of short fiction, poetry, novels and essays. Her 'English Lessons and Other Stories' explores the predicament of earlier neglected women of Sikh community by putting them in the context of globalization, immigration to West and consumerism at Indian modern society. "Montreal 1962" presents a Sikh wife's attachment, love, determination, struggles and readiness to do anything for survival in Canada where her husband is threatened to remove his turban and cut his hair short to get the job. "Simran" presents the story of sacrifice of individual desire by a young Sikh girl because of her mother's fundamentalist attitude. The title of story "English Lessons" presents injustice to an Indian woman who has married to an American, who compels her to become a prostitute and a source of his earnings in the States. The fourth selected story "Jassie" tells us about the timely need of religious tolerance in the file of an Indian immigrant old woman. Being a feminist writer, though Baldwin has never claimed directly to be, she has very skillfully presented the issues of feminism through her own technique of presentation. She has used technique of presenting absence or opposite to highlight it indirectly. Thus, true to her technique, though not explicitly declared, Baldwin is one of the feminist writers who skillfully deals with feminine concerns.

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1 INTRODUCTION

A feminist is an openly political task pointing to explore and repair concepts of the masculinity, sex and gender. The term 'feminist' has very wide range, because some thinkers choose to define types of feminists based on research oriented analyses to focus politics and philanthropic involvement of ground level activists. Feminism aims to point out the types of gender discrimination by evaluating female in society and her real life encounters.

George Eliot and Margaret Fuller have taken initiatives through their classical works in 19th century to establish feminist literary criticism. Earlier to the 1970s, feminism is found dealing with the issue of female authorship as they are denied place on the literary canon because their views and presented condition in literature

are not considered as universal. The liberal feminists like Wollstonecraft and Beauvoir have initiated for equal rights to women while allotting them similar human and rational values on basis of their similar mental capability. Simultaneously, some feminists have identified differences between man and woman and for the time have made a point of focus to celebrate those differences. The main difference between men and women has been declared as the physical child bearing capacity gifted to only women. On basis of this they argued that woman 'naturally' cares, loves and gives more than man. They, moreover, argues that woman should celebrate this positive quality without caring for the negative associations of femininity by the dominant patriarchy. Rather than celebrating difference it is recognized that this has been strengthened in society,

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politics, ideology and linguistics as deep-rooted and sustained to oppress woman. A group of writers has focused on differences related to classes, races, religions, capabilities and disabilities, age factor, sexual intensity and profession. These can be considered as different interpretation tools to understand more places and situations of repression, opposition and spaces provided to female. Enforced by the social, political and ideological norms the practices, attitudes and socially constructed modes of behaviour which are considered appropriate for women vary between the cultures as they are made suitable by the aspects of classes and religions within specific culture. This suggests that femininity is not a biological or natural reality, instead it is a man-made cultural product developed by men in order to subjugate feminine binary oppositions. This paper is an attempt to examine Baldwin's presentation of silencing of marginalized women by the dominant ideologies or oppressive social and political structures. It also examines the method adopted by Baldwin to keep something unspoken in the story rather than directly present it or speak about, and how this provides readers scope for the extensions that can be made because of the absence or opposite presentation.

2 METHODOLOGY

The present search is based on analytical and interpretative methods. An attempt has been made to explore Baldwin's presentation of women in the multi-cultural society as presented by she in her selected stories. To prepare reader's mind for further reading, background of feminism and introduction to Baldwin's writing and specifically her short story collection have been provided. Further, the selected stories have been discussed from feminist point of view to focus on predicament of women in the stories to bring out some facets of Baldwin's writing. The feminist and cultural problems of women protagonists are pointed out while mentioning the dialogues and situations in the stories. In discussion, Baldwin's special way of presentation and its effectiveness and success in achieving the goals has been pointed out.

3 SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S LIFE AND WORKS

Shauna Singh Baldwin is a writer of short fiction, poetry, novels and essays. 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. 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" (Pereira, 2005). At the end of this analysis we will be identifying it true as she has presented the problems faced by women to demand open-end solutions from the readers.

Baldwin's *English Lessons and Other Stories* (1996) passionately dramatizes the predicament of women from India who expand their world from Indian land to Canadian and North American and from the marginalized circle of their family to the wilder offices and universities. The ordinary woman finds her courage by tapping her own heart and mind for entering into the new material and emotional world. The protagonists are mostly sketched on her personal experiences as an immigrant. In her Keynote speech 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). However, what she has presented in her stories comes very close to the reality as it has been portrayed on the basis of her own experiences.

4 ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH LESSONS AND OTHER STORIES

Her *English Lessons and Other Stories* explores the predicament of earlier neglected women of Sikh community under Sikh masculinity by mapping them in the context of globalization, immigration to West and consumerism at Indian modern society. 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) Thus, a range of women characters presented by Baldwin covers almost all the phases of woman's life.

The first selected story entitled "Montreal 1962" presents a Sikh wife's predicament while she is in Canada with her husband who is threatened to remove his turban and cut his hair short to get the job. The turban carries much more religious and cultural affection and affiliation in the life of Sikh women. It stands as a symbol of their tradition. The protagonist has never seen any male member of her family without a turban. But, unfortunately the turban seems to be a curtain or bed sheet to the Canadian woman who is a dry-cleaner and has removed eyebrows. The people of Canada expect and compel Sikh protagonist's husband to surrender his culture identification mark and traditions to suite the adopted world: "You must be

reborn white-skinned – to survive” (Baldwin, 2007: 15). The subtle description of the procedure to wash, dry, fold and wear turban highlights the attachment and love any Sikh woman has with it. For the Sikh woman protagonist the red color of turbans represents the color of 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” (Baldwin, 2007: 17). When the woman protagonist ties the turban to her head, it makes her remember the community cultural heritage: “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” (Baldwin, 2007: 18). She wishes her husband not to lose his identity which is based on great tradition and culture before the Canadian company people who do not know what it takes for wear a turban for the Sikhs. She very proudly 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” (Baldwin, 2007: 18).

The second selected story “Simran” 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 away from the Americans and not to make friends among foreign students while studying in the United 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. She has very bold memories of past about the Muslim community. She states: “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” (Baldwin, 2007: 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?” (Baldwin, 2007: 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.” (Baldwin, 2007: 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.” (Baldwin, 2007: 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 - Mirza 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.

The title story “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 that she should learn to speak English and pass her interview for immigration process and to memorize her forgiveness 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” (Baldwin, 2007: 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?” (Baldwin, 2007: 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” (Baldwin, 2007: 142). Tony warns Mrs. Keogh, her teacher of English, to teach Kanwaljit not more than she knows, but teach enough that she should get a good-

salary job at Dunkin' Donuts or Holiday Inn. He warns Mrs. Keogh: "She will learn quickly, but you must not teach her too many American ideas" (Baldwin, 2007: 143).

The fourth selected story "Jassie" is about a sixty-five year old immigrant Indian mother Jassie who lives in a room with her American son-in-law's mother, Elsie. These two old women are together as Jassie's daughter Minni and Elsie's son Ted are married and they are the only supports to both of them in their old age. The story focuses on the cultural and religious differences between these two old women. Her son-in-law is an African-American Christian. Jassie explains: "We have little in common, Elsie and I. Only that we are both mothers, and our children are married" (Baldwin, 2007: 162). Jassie has two mothers and is equally loved much by both of them. She is of the opinion that American women have no tradition of loving children. She believes: "This was difficult for white women who had never known the love of children to understand" (Baldwin, 2007: 162). She is very much religious and always prays her Gods. She remembers that in the convent school along with the proper British lady's English, she was taught by the teachers the Christian prayers. She remembers: "...they asked us to pray for the health of the Pope and all the bishops and archbishops, although these men were not their husbands, I felt these men were those who had power over my teachers, so I prayed – but not to their God – that they would be generous" (Baldwin, 2007: 163). She also remembers that the school introduced her to a ballroom dancing where she met Firoze and flirted with him for some time. They had same background as both knew history of England and not of their own countries. They expected the servants to have darker skin than their own. But, Jassie marries the man her father chooses. He takes a house in old Delhi as dowry. He fathers first a daughter and then two sons. She names her daughter as Yasmeen in the memory of Firoze, but family calls her Minni. At the end of the story when Elsie has anxiety attack and asks Jassie to read the Christian prayers for her, she imagines the possibility of her learning the namaaz easily as she learned rosary of Elsie. She still carries her memories of the first love with her from India to America and will continue till death. In this way, the story highlights the expatriate sensibility of an immigrant woman who lives while recalling her happy past as a remedy to cope with the present alienation and loneliness.

5 DISCUSSIONS

Being a Feminist writer, though Baldwin has never claimed directly to be, she has very skillfully presented the issues of feminism through her own technique of presentation. She has used technique of presenting absence or opposite to highlight it indirectly. We know that Baldwin has declared that "to demand justice, I find I must explore injustice". Similarly, in "Montreal 1962" Baldwin, instead of explicitly demanding justice for Sikhs, she has focused on injustice to them. Instead of

explicitly telling us about the psychological ties of a Sikh woman with her cultural identity, through the keen detailing of the procedure to wash, dry, fold and wear the turban, she focuses on the attachment and love any Sikh woman has with it. The reference to 'red colour turban' and its connection to the cultural significance of past memories of the blood of the Sikh martyrs is a sort of unique blend which provides us a clue to look into the mental being of a Sikh woman. Through a small decision to work herself for the lively hood of the family, Baldwin exposes her determination not to lose the traditional and cultural roots before the Canadians. One should agree with the praise for the book on her website, which states that these mostly sad but insightful stories examine the wounds and bruises experienced by immigrant Sikhs while learning to live with English-speaking community in North America. In "English Lessons" also Baldwin focuses on the injustice and miseries of life to demand justice for Kanwaljit, a marginalized Indian woman through marriage with an American. Through the presentation of her sexual exploitation and compulsion to become a prostitute and a source of earnings to her American husband, Baldwin indirectly demands justice for her. In addition to that presentation of her being underground, prohibition to meet any Indian there, demand to look like a Mexican girl and introduction as his girlfriend in spite of being his wife are the realities of her life. Being an illegal immigrant, she is raped by an American man many times. This is again very instrumental for Baldwin to focus on what is expected through what is present in case of an Indian trapped woman in America.

Baldwin has also stated that "for the return of liberal secular individualism, I have to engage with and examine fascism, fundamentalism and other forms of group-think." Accordingly, in "Simran" Baldwin instead of praising individualism of a young daughter of the Sikh family, focuses on her sacrifice in denying an opportunity to have education in America due to Fascism and Fundamentalism in the age old dislike and rivalry between the Sikhs and Muslims. Her mother is a Fascist who doubts her daughter's cultural corruption and even virginity. Simran falls prey to her parents' fundamental suspicious nature and fears of the possible disgrace if their daughter loves and marries a Muslim. By focusing on the sacrifice of individualism under powerful fundamentalism, Baldwin applies her readers to rethink about the social institutions like religion and marriage. Baldwin remains true to her statement that "if I yearn for tolerance, I have to write about the effects of intolerance". Thus, in "Jassie" Baldwin presents inevitable tolerance despite the cultural and religious differences between the two old women Jassie and Elsie. An Indian immigrant Jassie's doubt about American tradition due to fundamental cultural differences and missing her first love because of religious intolerance are exposing inner core of her psyche. Her intolerant nature has been molded into tolerant by the age factor and dependent situation. And it has been proved through Jassie's reading of the Christian prayers, the end of the

story, when Elsie has anxiety attack and her nostalgic thinking about the possibility of her learning the namaaz (if she had married her first love- a Muslim). The religious intolerance denied her first love and helplessly still she carries the memories of it.

In the stories all the details are purposeful. These stories provide characters from different generations and different social status, position and posture along with their specific views. Baldwin explores the trouble and insults experienced by Sikhs in immigration while understanding how to live with alien people. These are truth delivering, emotional, sweet and sour stories. The context of Sikh family, unknown place and unexpected politics are produced like wonderful intaglio printings.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In this collection Baldwin aims to bring focus on several interrelated issues of race, gender, ethnicity and immigration by interpreting and evaluating the experiences particularly of the immigrant Indian Sikhs. For this purpose she has adopted the technique of focusing on the absence of what is demanded by focusing on completely opposite reality. In other words, to focus on need of light, she has focused on the presence of dark. Similarly, she focuses injustice to demand justice, intolerance to demand tolerance, fascism to value individual rights and tells lie to tell the truth. These stories present bad realities of the people from Asia and America, who belong to ethnic, blacks, immigrants, Eastern, minorities, hyphenated, diaspora, inferiority, hybridist, subaltern, others, refugees, outsiders, expatriates and a variety of more people in the world. This is deliberately done by Baldwin while expecting readers to bring change in that. Nevertheless, besides the identity of immigrants, it focuses on the life and the predicament of Asian Diasporas in the Western world. Baldwin's story is an indirect 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. One can claim that Baldwin is successful in fetching

attention to the issue of gender inequality by focusing problems of women like identity crisis, isolation, double marginalization, sexual exploitation, disillusionment, nagging sense of guilt, cultural conflict, racial discrimination, a sense of dislocation, nostalgia, tracing the roots and expatriate sensibility. Thus, true to her technique, though not explicitly declared, Baldwin is one of the feminist writers who skillfully deals with feminine concerns.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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