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Diasporic Boundaries: Shauna Singh Baldwin's *English Lessons and Other Stories*

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Abstract

Living in Canada Shauna Singh Baldwin is paradigmatic of the polycultural quality of contemporary literature and has helped to evolve what may be called transnational literature. Baldwin's three well popular stories- "Family Ties", "English Lessons" and "Jassie" out of the treasure of fifteen passionate stories dramatize the lives of Indian women from 1947 to today in Canada and from the heartless closed circle of the family to the wilderness of country. The women characterized in these three stories inhabit silence-by saying little, they can say a lot. Here less is more. In this way the trope of Diaspora, of dislocation becomes the major point in Shauna Singh Baldwin's diasporic narrative world. Baldwin's stories function as ironic commentaries of contemporary culture and society. Her fiction is repetitive of her Diasporic predicament. Each of her stories and characters is balanced just a little differently on the abyss of dislocation. On the whole, Baldwin rises as a personal, socio-political and cultural writer of Diaspora and her Diaspora seems to reach a destination in her continued search for stable values of culture. In this way the trope of Diaspora, of dislocation becomes the major point in Shauna Singh Baldwin's diasporic

narrative world. The study is based on the analysis of short stories of Shauna Singh Baldwin the woman novelist and short story-teller of Indian diaspora in Canada. A powerful literary voice rising from North America but echoing worldwide, Shauna Singh Baldwin gives us widely diverse characters who enable us to understand the boundaries between home and diaspora we all share.

Keywords: Paradigmatic, Polycultural, transnational literature, contemporary literature, trope of Diaspora, diasporic narrative world, socio-political and cultural writer.

Living in Canada Shauna Singh Baldwin is paradigmatic of the polycultural quality of contemporary literature and has helped to evolve what may be called transnational literature. Baldwin's three well popular stories- "Family Ties", "English Lessons" and "Jassie" out of the treasure of fifteen passionate stories dramatize the lives of Indian women from 1947 to today in Canada and from the heartless closed circle of the family to the wilderness of country. The women characterized in these three stories inhabit silence-by saying little, they can say a lot. Here less is more. The term diaspora (Ancient Greek "a scattering or sowing of seeds") in general, is used to refer to any people or ethnic population forced or induced to leave their traditional ethnic homelands; being dispersed throughout other parts of the world, and the ensuing developments in their dispersal and culture. Originally, the diaspora was used by the Greeks to refer to citizens of an imperial city, who migrated to a conquered land with purpose of colonization to assimilate the territory into the empire. The original meaning was cut off from the present meaning when the Old Testament was translated into Greek. Then the word diaspora was used to refer specifically to the populations of Jews exiled from Judea in 586 BC by the

Babylonians, and Jerusalem in 135 AD by the Roman Empire. This term is used interchangeably to refer to the historical movements of the dispersed ethnic population of Israel, the cultural development of that population, or the population itself.

The history is full of diaspora-like events. The history of Migration Period can be divided into three phases. The first phase of Migration Period i.e. displacement from between AD 300 and 500, included relocation of the Goths Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Vandals, Franks, various Germanic tribes, Burgundians, Alans, Langobards, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Suebi, Alamanni and numerous Slavic tribes. The second phase, between AD 500 and 900, saw Slavic, Turkish and other tribes on the move, re-settling in Eastern Europe and gradually making it predominantly Slavic, and affecting Anatolia and the Caucasus as the first Turkic peoples Avars, Huns, Varangians arrived. The last phase of the migrations saw coming of the Magyars and the Viking expansion out of Scandinavia.

(Said, Edward, *Culture and Imperialism*, 44)

The diasporic writings have been receiving increasingly academic and disciplinary recognition throughout the globe. It has emerged as a distinct literary genre. Its emergence has produced a radical transformation or 'paradigm shift' in literary and cultural studies. It is in the process of acquiring canonical status. These diasporic writings have been valued not merely because they are all concerned with giving a voice to the displaced and dislocated, not because they are all determined to narrate, and thus put on record their pasts-bequeathed memories, oral testimonies, remembered histories and stories, also not because they espouse social and political ideology but they are important because they

provide a profound insight into the forces that shape a new society; they offer a theory that explains how politics works in a society of different cultures; and they represent the true spirit of the age rather than the supposed pasts-bequeathed memories, oral testimonies, remembered histories and stories. It is important to note here that while responding creatively to the past, they are conscious of the present and give hint of the future.

There are many factors which contribute to this interest in the past among the diasporic writers. As Prof. Shrawan K. Sharma in his article entitled "The World of Diasporic Poetry in Canada" (26-45) has rightly demonstrated the diasporic psyche conspicuously after migrating to any country directly or indirectly, there are social and political restrictions on the life of the diaspora, so these writers do not respond to the social and political life. In order to satisfy their creative urge and to awaken their national pride, they choose the past for their writings. They have a general exposure to other cultures after leaving their country and this makes them project their glorious past. The feeling of the better past than the present, which is haunting them, again gives a consequent curiosity in the past. They now want to make an assessment of their own nation in relation to other nations of the world. They are aware of the fact that they are different from those with whom they interact. They use past as a weapon of a psychological war. The feeling to do justice with a certain historical character or event is yet another factor of this diasporic consciousness among the diasporic writers. Though the scene is much changed now, the current of historical consciousness is still flowing among the diasporic Indian writers in Canada as they now make an assessment and re-assessment of the past from a fresh perspective from the vantage ground of freedom. They do not spare any

opportunity to versify their nostalgic response to their homeland and reaction to the alien land lead to a kind of hope for change of the alien land into a new homeland. This account tells us that their background serves as the basis of their poetry upon which it flourishes. This background has two phases of their experience. The first phase consists of their cultural, religious, educational and experiential experiences of the homeland which they are already equipped with and which they are proud of and so much their inheritance a part of their writing. As far as the second phase is concerned, it is filled with their immediate experiences in the hostile, social environment where they feel themselves doubly marginalized: first they are immigrants and second because they belong to racial often linguistic, usually religious minorities. In a word, the alienation of the immigrant and the bitter stings of racism and religious bigotry, the painful daily realities and their native civilization and traditions are important factors in shaping their lives, politics and art. The present study is to articulate the diasporic journey and its experience in Canada as a constructive process of reconciliation with, affirmation and acceptance of space and stable values. The study is based on the analysis of short stories of Shauna Singh Baldwin the woman novelist and short story-teller of Indian diaspora in Canada.

Diaspora : Its Salient Features-

The central feature of the diasporic writing is a cyclic journey that starts from one's homeland to an alien land and then with a sense of loss in the hostile social environment, ceaselessly struggles and then at last with a hope of change starts the process of reconciliation, assimilation and affirmation. This is a journey from the centre to the periphery and again from the periphery to the centre. Needless to say

that there are many variations upon this scene, and the one essential thing is that there should be three distinct regions. The regions which the diasporic poets themselves employ are the homeland, the alien land and the new homeland. The diasporic poets who have a straight forward exposition of this journey, identify these regions with the past, the present and the future and that is generally the case when the journey denotes the historic time. More frequently, however it denotes the life of an immigrant, and then the three regions are the home culture, alien culture and the multicultural. Whichever they be, they invariably have the same character : the first is a period of joyous innocence when one lives in harmony with social and natural climate, the second a period of suffering when one is alone in a hostile world, and the third a period of reconciliation in which suffering subsides into a new hope for space.

The basis for this view is found in a conception of diaspora which has been widespread in different periods. It has been put forward in the entries on diaspora in dictionaries and encyclopedias by various scholars. There the term "diaspora" denotes a process by which people of particular nation become scattered in other countries. It has been a history-specific term as it has been referred to "the settlement abroad of the Jews, hummed out from their homeland." The fundamental premise of this expulsion are:

- It is associated with the sense of displacement;
- It carries a sense of desire for the return to their roots;
- It has feeling of nostalgia and remembrance of the home country,
- It is associated with a sense of loss,
- It informs the diasporic consciousness;

- It involves a painful process of acculturation and adjustment.

In the modern context too, these features are very much relevant as the term denotes a dispersal or spreading of people originally belonging to one nation or having a common culture. This sense of displacement, desire for the return to their roots, feelings of nostalgia, remembrance of the home land with a sense of loss that informs the diasporic consciousness and the experience of a painful process of acculturation and adjustment is common to all who have left their homeland for an alien land. At the end of his work *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward said quotes a twelfth century monk from Saxony Hugo of St. Vicar where he elaborates his journey of the exile from his homeland to the globe. He holds that the exile first becomes 'tender' (who finds his homeland sweet), then 'strong' (to whom every soil is his native one) and finally 'perfect' (to whom the entire world is a foreign place) (Said Edward, *Culture and Imperialism*, 44) The diasporic novelists who find themselves sandwich between two cultures: "born under one law, to another bound" move from faith and joy through the center of indifference to the nature faith or understanding. This three-fold pattern arises from the alteration of vital or organic periods, which are periods of faith and imagination, with mechanical or critical periods, which are periods of skepticism dominated by the understanding. Thus the total pattern is always a threefold cycle of thesis, antithesis and synthesis repeating itself over and over again. To the diasporic novelists as well as story-tellers this cycle of three consists of the past, the present and the future which may be understood as feeling of nostalgia, sense of loss and consciousness of the new homeland.

Shauna Singh Baldwin reflects the sentiments and desires of Individual displaced geographically, culturally, and linguistically in her three stories i.e. "Family Ties", "English Lessons" and "Jassie" of Indian Disapora from the point of view of cultural territory. Their characters express the process of physical psychological adaptation of the new environment. First of these stories "Family Ties" possesses an emphatic outset of discriminated outlook towards sex. As the protagonist exclaims, "Everyone says Inder is the smart one and I the steady" (Baldwin, *English Lessons and other Stories*, 21) why only because she is a girl. This short story is a window to the mind and heart of Baldwin. We get a sympathetic and detailed pen-portrait of her own psyche caught in complex dilemma of being a second sex. Baldwin exposes the emotional truth to the fullest core. This story lifts the curtain that shrouds the inner most thoughts and fears of all. It shows rigid aspect of being a girl in a conservative family of ties. As Baldwin writes in the story, "I have begun to know what pain it means to be a woman. I think our eucalyptus must be a girl tree, it takes too much from the soil and leaves everything around it parched and angry" (Baldwin, *English Lessons and other Stories*, 27).

Thus the whole story is woven with the bleeding threads of feminism. Here woman is made not born. To conclude Baldwin's approach here echoes that of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* where she actuates the woman today "Woman is losing her way, woman is lost. One wonders if women still exist. . . today as always they make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that of feminity is in danger." (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*,13) Baldwin is thunderstruck at the traumatic consequences of the game which turns into a planned hunt. Patriarchy has finally silenced her characters in her diasporic narrative world .This

is a world to expose the silencing of the woman's voice. The apparently innocent nursery rhyme that ends the play, can be seen as an allegorical commentary on the gruesome nature of patriarchal society as Beauvoir comments "When she does not find love, she may find poetry." (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 384). This reminds us of the death-train, experience of Khuswant Singh's *a Train to Pakistan* also. The partition of 1947 has its under black shadow on Chandini Kaur i.e. Moonlight princess, who was abducted by Muslim and now this Jehanara Begum was rejected consequently under her own family ties for having a Musalman's child. She was such forced as to stay her own tiny child underwater and stop its life music helplessly. But in spite of this infanticide she was rejected by her family and declared to the dead and she became mad out of grief. But amazingly enough these family ties are not for the boy of the family. Though he smokes philanders and has drugs yet he is the only hope and life of family. He can't be impure in any case. For he is a boy. His sister's life depends wholly on his liking. She is a girl and her utmost skill is to be fit in every condition. If her eyes are weak, this caused a stain on the family and is a serious matrimonial problem.

Baldwin has a stronger tone of disappointment and disillusionment with Canada in her work. Her creativity is dipped in acid on a Diasporic imagination. As she writes:

I pick up five round smooth stones from the garden. I throw a big stone in the air and pick up one stone at a time from the remaining four. The first stone is for a woman whose meant Moonlight, the second for the Muslim who took her by force, the third is for fourth. The big stone hits the ground before my hand can pick up the fourth. The fourth and fifth are a brother and his mad sister, partitioned by family ties (Baldwin, *English Lessons and other Stories*, 31).

Baldwin's the "English Lessons" is a dynamics of discord. An emotional, story of culture clash where the protagonist Kanwaljit, faces the problem of being displaced from her own land and culture and finds herself in a totally new environment. She is Tony's Green Card wife groping for a safe platform for her existence. In such a situation where she is seen as culturally, linguistically or sometimes psychologically estranged the whole question of her identity becomes an unattainable ideal. "English Lessons" reflects this anxiety of an Indian caught in a world of conflicting values. She can't discipline her only child Suryavir for Tony's parents would have been angry-he is their only grandson. She can't call his name in America before her green card comes. She will call him Johnny like Tony's Johnny Walker Whisky. She has to change her own name also. She asked Valrie, a nice lady to call her Kelly. No one there can say Kanwaljit. And Kanwaljit is left far away in Amritsar, before the fire. Tony says that she has to wear pants to look Mexican. But first she will learn English which is a must to pass her immigration interview and to memorize, her amnesty story. Therefore she will take English Lessons till her green Card comes. She lives like a worm avoiding the sun light. She wants to cry if two years of their life are not enough, if her unacknowledged wifhood is not enough. She does not want to be her faithless husband's girl-friend and to call her son his bastard. But forcibly enough she has to follow her husband's style of living. She was martyred unlike *Dropdi*. Her virtue was crucified but she was given vengeance and the evil doer comes before her half dead due to the police fire and Kanwaljit was ready to learn her English Lessons from her English teacher to pass the time and not to have American ideas as her husband instructs but she will ask her teacher on tomorrow how to learn drive.

Baldwin's third story "Jassie" demonstrates the complex vision of life through the paradoxical contraries of life and death, nature and civilization, individual and society, east and west, past and present etc. This story even behind its seemingly unattached ironic attitude to life is not without a positive content. Through all the conflicting values there certainly seems a continuous search for a stable island in the running stream of life. Jassie, in the story Jassie seems to be *Jassie Jaisi Koi Nahi*. Though she visits soap operas, Mass on loudspeakers and ballroom dancing she remains essentially Indian. Her very Indian consciousness is revealed after the *Khadi* love and in the chanting of *Bande Mantram* and *Jana Gana Mana*. The story proves emphatically that there is no essential difference between the east and the west. At the end of the story, Jassie is ready to pray for Christian Elsie. Elsie calls her, "Jassie will you pray with me." And Jassie wants to say, "My name is Jassie, not Jassie. You don't like to hear me speak Punjabi, and you need Christian prayers, not mine" (154). But this is not the time, Elsie was on her death bed. Jassie takes her rosary from the bed post and say "our Father, who art in HeavenH." (154). And she wonders, could she have learned the *namaaz* easily as she learned rosary.

In this way the trope of Diaspora, of dislocation becomes the major point in Shauna Singh Baldwin's diasporic narrative world. Baldwin's stories function as ironic commentaries of contemporary culture and society. Her fiction is repetitive of her Diasporic predicament. Each of her stories and characters is balanced just a little differently on the abyss of dislocation. On the whole, Baldwin rises as a personal, socio-political and cultural writer of Diaspora and her Diaspora seems to reach a destination in her continued search for stable values of culture.

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