

GENDER DYNAMICS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN

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Abstract

The paper examines the intercultural relationships and the varying perceptions of values. The article focuses on the experiences of women who struggle for identity in patriarchal societies based on the selected short stories of Shauna Singh Baldwin. In these stories Baldwin raises a debate whether "a woman owns her own body?" She argues that the economy is the driving factor in the roles played by men and women in the family dynamics. The present study looks into the traditionally imposed gender roles and the notion of motherhood.

Key Words: gender issues, exploitation, motherhood

Baldwin addresses the issues— gendered oppression, treating women as commodities, and the different attitudes of Indian and American women towards love and marriage in the short story “Nothing Must Spoil This Visit.”

The Hungarian-American Janet and her Indian husband Arvind based in Toronto are in India together for the first time after their marriage. The visit is significant to her as she is eager to explore the homeland of her husband, its traditions, not as a novice tourist but as someone who has studied art and history of India. The trip is significant to Arvind and the members of his family too as he is going to meet them after ten long years.

Many surprises are in store for Janet during the trip. She feels offended at the racist and gendered nature of comments of the police man at the Punjab border. Delphine Munos observes, “In fact, not only does the policeman sanction Janet's difference by projecting derogatory gendered stereotypes onto her, but he also constructs her as other by associating her with a racialized position of privilege” (5).

Arvind avoids correcting the policeman when he considers him a Hindu instead of Sikh as he does not wear a turban. Arvind's non disclosure of his religious identity is another surprise to Janet. As she is aware of his political activism against the regime of Indira Gandhi, his opportunism shocks her. More shocking is the seemingly illogical power structure in the family of Arvind and its impact on the relationships between the members of the family.

The relationship between Arvind and his younger brother Kamal is strained. Kamal is jealous of his brother. He thinks that Arvind escapes to Canada shirking away family responsibilities and returns as a successful engineer sporting his white wife, and has all the advantages of freedom and status whereas he, who has taken up the family responsibility

obediently, is deprived of such financial freedom and social status. Kamal compares his docile wife Chaya to the demonstratively dynamic Janet. In those moments of low spirits, he tries to console himself. "At least she wasn't like Janet, brash and talkative, asking questions as though she had a right to the answers" (Baldwin 107).

Arvind and Janet visit the ancestral house in Shimla and the narrative gets the twist providing disturbing insights into the familial history and the relationship between Arvind and Chaya. In the ancestral home, Janet finds a photograph of 25 year old Arvind and Chaya smiling at him adoringly. Through the dialogic interaction of Janet with Arvind and his mother, Baldwin reveals the way women are treated as commodities. Baldwin highlights the family power structure where not only men, elderly women too, support patriarchy, and the submissiveness of Chaya who is forced to marry Kamal, instead of his elder brother Arvind to whom she is engaged for a year.

Chaya and Kamal go on his motorcycle to Shimla for a picnic with the permission of their elders. As they have a flat tire, they have to spend that night together. Though Kamal denies any sexual relationship between them the elders break the engagement with Arvind and force her to marry Kamal. When she protests she is threatened and as she complies with them, they appreciate her stance and start calling her an adjustable woman, a tag she has to bear with unwillingly. Even her parents do not pay any attention to the feelings of Chaya. Though she bears a son for Kamal, her love towards Arvind remains unabated. In contrast, Arvind's relationship with Chaya lacks warmth. He does not even bother to enquire the reasons for the breakup of the engagement. In his life Janet replaces Chaya.

Janet who is conscious of her superior status owing to her race, the freedom she enjoys in the western society, and the economic independence feels sorry for Chaya, and questions her meek submission to the decision of elders regarding a highly serious matter, marriage. During their one on one interaction, Chaya comes to know of Arvind's inability in producing children. This revelation reverses the roles of Chaya and Janet. Chaya admonishes Janet, challenges her superiority, and sympathises with her childless state, and even advises her to learn the nuances of being an adjustable woman.

Chaya equates womanhood with motherhood, and manhood with the ability to produce children. A man who is incapable of producing children is not a man at all and is unworthy of either marriage or love. That is Chaya's view of life and relationship between wife and husband. The revelation has many consequences. It relieves Chaya from the pain she has been bearing with for several years. It will also give solace to Kamal who is in doubt about the true inheritance of his son. It humbles Janet in whose heart the received concept of racial supremacy lurks.

Delphine Munos says, "In many ways Baldwin suggests that Janet's overconfidence in the superiority of her own cultural positionality as a western woman verges on self-deception and constitutes a smokescreen which spares her the trouble of acknowledging her own commodification by the bearers of authority" (12).

The story "Lisa" is about a live in relationship in USA, which breaks after a couple of years. Lisa is asked to move out of his house by her Indian boyfriend who wants to marry

another woman. Jaya, an Indian immigrant comes to know of Lisa through their mutual friend Brenda and at her behest, Jaya agrees to put her up in her house. In this story, Baldwin raises moral issues, apathy towards the girl child, and the challenges single mothers face.

Jaya's Indian cultural background does not allow her to approve the live in relationship. Her first impression of Lisa is highly critical. When Lisa claims that she is anti abortion, Jaya says, "Besides, you're a little late with your morality, since you're the one who lived with him without being married first" (Baldwin 68).

Live in relationships and contract marriages are American inventions and revolve around sex, and those who opt for such a relationship must be aware of its fragile nature, and cannot hope for a lifelong commitment. The inter racial relationship is not structured on ethics and ends in break up, and the victimisation of Lisa is hardly noticed outside her friends' circle and her voice goes unheard. Jaya's argument is that by accepting to live in with him without being united legitimately by the institution of marriage, Lisa has created the impression that she is a woman of easy virtue, and she loses her right to speak about his volte face. It is true that her boyfriend does not care for social mores like dependability, morality, responsibility and equality. However, Lisa cannot claim that she is more virtuous.

Baldwin points out the issue of gender bias in India. Jaya tells Lisa that if she has given birth to a baby boy, her Indian boyfriend might have come forward to support him. Majority of the people condemn discrimination in the name of sex in their speeches and writings, but they practise it and gender equality remains a distant dream. Equality cannot be forced through legislation. It becomes a reality only when the mindset of men undergoes transformation.

In the story "English Lessons" Baldwin once again focuses on the exploitation of women by the male members of the family and its drastic effect on relationships. The women who are neither free nor equal mostly due to their economic dependence remain subservient till they learn to live on their own. The diasporic space despite its complexities may provide some women, opportunities to free themselves from gendered oppression. In this story, Baldwin points out that there are occasions where American women too are trapped and exploited for the sake of Green Cards.

In India Kanwaljit is blackmailed and under inevitable circumstances she has to satisfy the sexual urges of her husband's younger brother. Later she grabs the opportunity, strikes with a vengeance and is indirectly responsible for her brother-in-law's death. Her act of vengeance goes unnoticed just like the act of violation of her virtue. Her husband, who prefers to be called by the American name Tony, lives with an African-American for two years, gets the marriage certificate and after obtaining the Green Card deserts her. Her tearful protests have no impact on him. Kanwaljit joins her husband, and though she feels disturbed whenever she listens to the tearful voice of her husband's Green Card wife on the answering machine, she believes that the African- American's relationship with Tony cannot be compared to her relationship with him. "I cannot imagine him with her black body- and if I can, what of it? Many men pay prostitutes. This one's price was higher and she lasted longer. And he got his green card after two years. Thus am I here" (131- 132).

Answering to a question in an interview by Rosalia Scalia, Baldwin says, “She's angry at the Green Card wife, because it's so much easier to blame the person who is distant, rather than to direct her anger toward her husband, where it belongs. Both women- the Green Card wife and the Indian wife-are used” (Shauna Singh Baldwin: *Writing ThroughTears*).

Kanwaljit's husband hatches a plan for getting Green Card for her too. He wants her to act like his girl friend, and never disclose her identity as his wife. His instruction hurts her as that fabricated relationship makes her son his bastard. He tells her to pick up some English and plead immigrant officials for amnesty. He is afraid of American cultural influences on her and hints the English tutor not to “teach her too many American ideas” (Baldwin 133).

His attitude further irritates Kanwaljit. She understands that her husband is cautious as the diasporic space might provide opportunities for her to free herself from his domination. She rebels silently and makes her own strategies. A day may come when Kanwaljit with her newly acquired skills and resources challenges his domination. She is conscious of her identity, and her ability to take decisions.

C. Vijayasree in her article “Survival as an Ethic” quotes Lata Mani. “Migration did not effect any substantial structural changes in patriarchal systems, but simply reconfigured them. Therefore, consequences of migration are specifically different for men and women” (132).

In the story “English Lessons” Kanwaljit is forced to wait till she picks up some skills, before challenging the domination of her husband. The protagonist in the other short story of Baldwin, “The Cat Who Cried”, is a product of Boston University and in comparison to Kanwaljit is in a far more advantageous position in fighting against bias and oppression. She is self-conscious and upright.

Baldwin reiterates the fact that not only men, elderly women too contribute to the subjugation of fellow women. Encouraged by his mother Prem takes all crucial decisions related to the family without consulting his wife. She is kept in dark about his plans, and her views are ignored. This hurts the self-esteem of the protagonist, and she revolts.

The mother-in-law reacts sensitively when she hears the cry of a cat but surprisingly not at all bothered about the cries of her daughter-in-law. Whenever she hears or imagines that she has heard the cry of a cat, she considers it inauspicious and insists that all the family members should listen to the 1008 names of Lord Vishnu to protect the family from bad luck. Her attitude raises the question. When the cry of a cat somewhere outside the house brings bad luck to the family, does not the cry of the daughter-in-law bring bad luck? The protagonist knows when to be silent and when to reply back. She learns from her mother how to use the weapon of silence excellently.

Baldwin explores the difference between the relationships between mother and daughter, and mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Here, the question of fairness and justice comes to light. Mothers take all care for the survival of their daughters, and go up to any length to keep their families intact, but they do not show the same spirit when they deal with their daughters-in-law!

Baldwin brings out the gender bias shown by the protagonist's mother-in-law between

her grandson and granddaughter.

She noticed I had placed a statue of Saraswati in Shielas room and lifted the huge brass piece on her tiny shoulders, saying, "What a silly thing, putting a Saraswati statue in a girl's room. Put this Goddess where she will do some good, in the boy's room. She's the one who will inspire him to learn." I said nothing, but the next day I moved Saraswati back to Sheila's room. I refuse to apologise for wanting my daughter to be educated." (139)

At the behest of his mother Prem decides to go back to India. The protagonist who takes up a job is horrified to know that Prem has directed her employers to deposit her pay cheque in a bank account with the intention to return to India sooner with the extra money saved.

In this first person narrative, Baldwin compares the fissures in their relationship to the dissonance of musical notes in a rendition. The protagonist recollects her mother's advice and shows some restraint. She plays the cassette of 1008 names of Lord Vishnu. Her mother –in-law too joins her to listen to the auspicious names. The protagonist tries to make her husband and mother-in-law understand that the cry of a cat may or may not be a bad omen, but the hurt feeling of the daughter-in-law is certainly a bad omen. Will the message reach her husband and her mother-in-law? Can the mother-in-law ever understand that by simply listening to the 1008 names of Vishnu, she can never get redemption from the abuse of family power structure?

C.Vijayasree argues, "Women are born into an "expatriate" state (the term expatriation is itself conjoined to patriarchy) and they are expatriated in patria, hence a geographic movement away from home to an alien country is only an accentuation of gendered exile that they have all along borne" (131).

In the story "Jassie", the 65 year old woman suffers from loneliness in a foreign land amidst people in the home meant for the aged due to cultural differences. She does not find anything in common with her roommate Elsie. However, the relationship between them is friendly though Jassie is conscious of their religious differences.

Jassie often drifts into her thoughts and recapitulates her life from childhood. Like some other stories of Baldwin, historical incidents play a significant role in this story. Jassie recollects her youthful days, her affairs with Firoze, her ballroom dance partner, who leaves for Pakistan after partition, leaving a tug in her heart. Her relationship with her husband, a Sikh landowner, is casual and lacks the warmth she has felt in the company of Firoze. She feels that depriving women of their freedom by the family members is a new form of violence, and fighting against it is difficult. "The kind of violence one should fear is always quiet and comes all wrapped up in words like Love until you live with it daily and you value only that which is valuable to the violator" (Baldwin 154).

Jassie attacks polygamy in a veiled manner by saying that the expression of

motherhood has different layers of meaning. While Elsie is dying, Jassie sits by her side, picks up her rosary and says the Christian prayers, despite the fact that she is conscious of her Sikh traditions, and her preference to say the Japji in Punjabi.

The need for emotional bonding with her friend who is on death bed forces her to cross the borders of religious practices. Jassie thinks of her soul mate Firoze. She imagines her life with him. "I wonder could I have learned the namaaz as easily as I learned the rosary?" (157).

The story "Naina" set in Canada is the experience of an Indian woman, Naina, who becomes pregnant out of wedlock and is conscious of her social positioning and the future of the child. Basudhara Roy observes, "Seen in this biological context, the mother's body becomes a passive object impregnated by the life-seed of the father, and the child, a triumph of male fertility, Motherhood within marriage, in acceptance of patriarchal codes, therefore, reinforces patriarchy" (3).

Deserted by her boyfriend and ostracised by her family, Naina feels isolated and experiences motherhood in her own terms. She carries her child within her womb for 14 long years refusing to take medical help. Her state attracts the attention of the medical world, and Dr Chi, a Chinese hypnotist helps her in communicating with the child within the womb. Once all the fears are properly addressed, Naina gives birth to the child naturally without taking anyone's help.

Baldwin uses the technique of magic realism to highlight the ideology of woman's empowerment and identity and freedom from patriarchal oppression, and the relationship between single mother and society.

The story is about the expression of this ideology. The ideology is vague in its initial stages, takes shape over the gestation period, and when it is ready, it is expressed confidently. Naina is conscious of the circumstances the baby has to face in the world once it is out of her womb. From her interaction with the baby within, her fears are evident. Naina thinks that the hybrid nature of the baby may further complicate her upbringing in the society.

The arrival of the baby on the Diwali day is symbolic. On this day, Rama returns to his kingdom after spending 14 years in forests. Rama, who is denied his right to rule his kingdom, regains his right and comes back. Naina's hybrid baby too is denied her right to come into the world. She gains her right and comes into the world.

Baldwin compares the conceptualization state of the ideology – the gestation period and its expression with that of a work of art by telling the parallel story of Valerie's creative work. Valerie toils for years in creating a sculpture, and completes it to her satisfaction, on the same day the baby is out.

Basudhara Roy points out that Naina challenges the dependence of motherhood on the father. "Naina's preoccupations with the sender and receiver of her child are thus dissolved as the foetus dissociates itself from all ideological ties with the father, and as the mother and child unite to affirm a life and identity independent of the father, a new feminist discourse of motherhood is established" (3).

These stories of Baldwin challenge the assumptions entrenched in the value system of

various societies about identity based on gender and ethnicity. However, she instills hope by highlighting the fact that women are not silent sufferers and their voice will be heard paving way for the establishment of civilized societies which are free from binary oppositions.

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