

MEMORY AS HIS(HER)STORY. INTERSECTIONALITY AND DIASPORA AS CAPTURED IN THE SHORT STORIES OF SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN

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“I never fit in anywhere,” she says. “I’ve been a minority in three different countries, so I’m quite comfortable with the idea of being uncomfortable.”
(Shauna Singh Baldwin in an article published in ‘Globe and Mail’)

Abstract

An important strand in 20th century writing is diasporic writing from the intersectional space. Though fairly restricted in the actual body of work writing by diasporic women embodies power, through themes, characters, style, plots or approach.

An important voice from this space is that of Shauna Singh Baldwin, whose writing is interesting, due to the concerns it raises, its craftsmanship, the space from which it emerges and the nuances in character or theme.

Engaging with her short stories, this paper views her writing as representative of the intersectional diasporic space, to understand the dilemmas faced, despite seeming multiculturalism.

Keywords: diaspora, intersectionality, identity, home, belongingness, multiplacedness

A minority in multiple ways – encompassing gender (being a woman), religion (being a Sikh) and a diasporic, who has lived across three countries (Canada, India and America) – Shauna Singh Baldwin’s collections of short stories ‘English Lessons and Other Stories’ and ‘We Are Not In Pakistan’ become emblematic of the issues of identity that, intertwined with belongingness, acquire a unique poignancy and become interesting narratives, which offer insights into the changing constitution and concerns of the society and nation state. Named Shanaaz after birth, Shauna Singh Baldwin’s very name is an act of negotiating social discrimination that comes with identity, especially in the context of gender. She reveals that she hardly felt like a princess (a reference to the title Kaur in the name of Sikh women), given that her relatives, while sending congratulatory messages to her parents, at her birth, had also included a note of sympathy hoping that next time

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a son would be born. Moreover, she lost her family name on marrying out of the community and she wanted to retain a connection to her heritage; it was then she adopted the title Singh, usually given to a man; as that, meaning lion, was emblematic of ‘courage’, which she wanted to display both for herself and others and which she hoped would become a marker of her being.

Identity, a concern emerging from her personal space, has thus become an underlining theme of Shauna Singh’s writing, which however has been approached from multiple angles – that of place and displacement, from the point of view of diasporic Indians as well as other diasporic communities including the Russians (*Only a Button*) as also the Greeks and Mexicans (*Rendezvous*); the other of gender and the issues it creates, both from a gay perspective (*Fletcher*) and a woman’s perspective (in most stories) and minority religion – both in the context of home and the home left behind – whether that of the Sikhs (*Montreal 1962*) or the Christians in Pakistan (*We Are Not In Pakistan*). In this, her stories serve as an alternative record of history, from both the diasporic and the intersectional space.

Moreover, not only does she offer a perspective on history, by tackling the concerns of the Sikhs and the diasporics and the treatment of the Sikhs in diaspora, but also touches upon the major events recorded in mainstream history, casting on them a light different from what would find itself as the version that is recorded in official documents. Her story “The View from the Mountain” for example, deals with Ted Grand, an American, who had served in the war, who sets up a hotel in Costa Rica, becoming a part of the place and its people, till he hears the news of the 9/11 attacks, which reveals a different side of him – from being a jovial and outgoing person to becoming a fanatic.

While these subtle touches offer an alternative approach to looking at mainstream recording of history, it also questions the criticism levelled at most diasporics. As documented in “Lives of girls and women”,

Writers of colour are often told by their own communities that to display internal strife is to betray one’s own people, to open up a non-dominant culture to further misinterpretation and vilification. Writers of colour take an enormous risk when they critique their own cultures, one that leaves them vulnerable to censure from all sides. (MacDonald, 2006: 36)

And while it would be almost impossible to put a stop to the criticism levelled against diasporics, Shauna Singh’s writing, like that of most other diasporics derives value from just what it is criticised for – drawing attention to what gets neglected or is deliberately ignored in mainstream thought; which through its being expressed in a forthright manner can prevent history, nations and civilisations from repeating their own mistakes. And while there can be no definitive answer to “Are

my memories real or contaminated?" (*Only a Button*: 42), Shauna Singh's narratives at least offer an alternative perspective on the 'other' of place, gender and community.

Moreover, what offers an added edge to her writing is the western writing style through which her intersectional themes that largely revolve around Indians, whether at home or in diaspora, unfold. Unlike the closure in the ending that defines Indian writing, Shauna Singh's 'belonging' to varied spaces, has resulted in a style that affords an open ending to her stories, in turn reflecting the eternal difference that both her characters experience and her themes echo. Her short story "Jassie", dealing with the relation between two women, one an Indian the other an American, ends on the note "I wonder, could I have learned the namaaz as easily as I learned the rosary?" a thought which occurs to her, as despite being Sikh, she is mouthing a Christian prayer, on the request of her daughter's mother in law, which in turn reminds her of her love for a Muslim man, which she has had to abandon, given the restrictions afforded by religion and gender.

Exploring in diverse ways the uniqueness of relationships that result from a diasporic space and the concerns it gives rise to, Shauna Singh's writing deals with both the approach to diaspora and diasporics and the treatment meted out to them, through various stories. Some of these concerns are minor and superficial, yet nagging, as the inability to give a sari for laundering – "today I took one of my wedding saris to the neighbourhood dry-cleaner and a woman with no-eyebrows held it like a dishrag as she asked me, "Is it a bed sheet?" "No," I said. "Curtains?" "No." I took the silk back to our basement apartment, tied my hair in a tight bun, washed the heavy folds in the metal bathtub, and hung it, gold threads glinting, on a drip-dry hanger." (*Montreal 1962*: 5-6). Others have a far deeper impact and ramifications as they revolve around concerns with citizenship and the issues that women face while finding their footing in a foreign land, a theme explored in "English Lessons". Among these, she also deals with intermarriage with its various subtexts, including the reactions shown by the traditional Gayatri, in a story by the same name, who is both jealous and critical of her sister in law Reena, for her liberated clothes, job, etc., all of which she ascribes to the freedom afforded to Reena and Reena's foreign education - a criticism which turns to a mixture of triumph and censure, when she realises that the man Reena has chosen for herself and married is not merely an American, but a Black American at that.

This ability, to delve into and fuse multiple themes that lend her simply narrated stories a great deal of complexity, making them nuanced and layered, is also seen in the story "The Distance Between Us". In it Karanbir Singh, otherwise in the respectable and respected teaching profession, finds that he has not merely to contend with the knowledge that he has a daughter from a woman, whom he lived with and who had hidden this daughter's existence from him for 23 years, till her

death and the suspicions about and reservations against him that his daughter has, but also a racial attack on his home, which destroys all that he has so lovingly acquired and built, through perseverance, over many years. This secondary status that even diasporics in what are considered respectable professions face is also experienced by Dr Bakhtiar, when he is attempting to treat Larry and save his life, whereas Larry shrugs him off considering him a raghead and therefore also possibly gay, in the story “This Raghead”.

Contrapuntally, Shauna Singh’s stories also reflect upon the indomitable quirk of the diasporics – that of their desire to be accepted and be in tune with the times and expectations from the place, coupled with their inability to let go of traditions and beliefs they have acquired through the culture of their home left behind. A prominent theme explored in this light is that of marriage, where while the diasporics want their children to get the best jobs and lifestyle that the place they have settled in has to offer, they would still prefer to find a groom or bride for their child, from the home left behind, as is the case with Bibiji from ‘Toronto 1984’, who does all in her power to see that her daughter marries someone from the community, by thinking of inviting her brother and his son over to consolidate an alliance, with the boy, who “is still a good boy. Not too much gone to his head. You know, not become too Canadian.” (*Toronto 1984*: 63); since she cannot now travel to India against the backdrop that Indira Gandhi (the then Prime Minister) has been assassinated by a Sikh as a result of which “every Hindu would be looking for blood.” (*Toronto 1984*: 63). In doing so, though indirectly, Shauna Singh also touches upon major issues from one of her homes left behind. In “Lisa”, on the other hand, we see this issue taken forward through an Indian diasporic male, who has a blonde American girlfriend, with whom he is living together and who dumps her to get married to an Indian, while doing all in his power to not pay her subsistence, to bring up a daughter, who is born of the relationship.

Furthermore, while tackling this theme, Shauna Singh also touches upon issues and approaches, defined by identity, as the reaction of Jaya, an Indian acquaintance of Lisa, to the child of this mixed union “Just like a pure Indian baby..”, as well as Jaya’s retort to a query that arrests, as much through its straightforward simplicity as its honesty, “Brenda says you think he would have supported the baby if she’d been a boy.” “I think he would have.” (*Lisa*: 71), lending her writing both diversity and depth.

Interestingly, her involvement with place and (dis)location also lead her to situate her stories in India and draw upon symbolism and references from there. The story “Dropadi Ma”, for one, revolves around an age old domestic help, whom the children revere as a mother, since she has brought them up, who becomes a symbol of rebellion that lies buried in her very name. Like Draupadi from the Indian mythological tale - the ‘Mahabharat’, she too, in her own way, rebels against the

expectations and limitations imposed by her position, to give her blessings to Sukhi, a son of the family, who chooses to walk away from the marriage his family has fixed from him and go back to his life in Montreal. The only reaction of Dropadi Ma, who has brought up the children on stories, to Sukhi's act of resistance is "Her toothless smile was wide and joyous. "Come, little one. Ma will tell you a story." (*Dropadi Ma*: 12). Among Shauna Singh's other stories, located in India, are "Nothing Must Spoil This Visit" and "Rawalpindi 1919", among which, in the latter, a mother is already planning the change in their lifestyle, she and her husband would have to bring, when their son, who hasn't even left the home as yet, returns from 'vilayat' (abroad).

While diasporic writing has been both lauded and criticised for its concern with identity and the related issues of displacement, multiplaceness, home and belonging, what lends Shauna Singh's writing its distinctive flavour is the perspective that is added, as a result of the intersectional space, she occupies. Reflecting upon the issues that concern women and their treatment, despite the place they find themselves in and not merely because of it, as most would like to believe, her stories deal sensitively with their emotions, dilemmas, perspectives, points of view, concerns, treatment and their portrayal, whether it is the form of tackling their regular chores, like washing a turban, which pose their own challenges in a foreign land, given the lack of space to dry the turban or even wash a sari or more serious adjustments they have to make by changing their lifestyle, as the protagonist in 'Montreal 1962' realises. Being brought up in India and married to a Sikh, who is settled in Montreal, the protagonist in 'Montreal 1962' makes the revolutionary decision of taking up a job, to support her husband, who would have had to give up his turban – his identity – in order to blend with the crowd and not stand out, so that he could get a job. Though not an easy decision to make, it comes to her simply – as the only way to protect her husband from shame and humiliation – "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....My hands will tie a turban everyday upon your head and work so we can keep it there....Then we will have taught Canadians what it takes to wear a turban." (*Montreal 1962*: 8).

In fact her writing explores rebellion by women in varied forms, like the female fetus that Naina is carrying in her womb, which refuses to come out, realising that its presence in the world is unwelcome. When it finally does, way beyond the expected date of delivery, a problem which cannot be addressed by even the most competent doctors in Toronto and one which Naina is willing to deal with, rather than forcing the baby out, since she understands the baby's dilemma as a mother, it is because the mother and daughter have decided to find a completeness in their own world, unsupported by others. An equally powerful resistance is that put up by Devika, a very 'homely' woman, whose schizophrenic other or alter ego (Shauna Singh leaves which to the reader's imagination), Asha – meaning hope – who is

Devika's exact opposite, takes over her personality, in order to adapt to the land, which is now her home – "I am Asha," she said, voice low and husky. "Devika was afraid of living here, so she just...flew away.".....Then Asha closed her swollen eyes and felt Devika drift away as though she had never been" (*Devika*: 180).

Another aspect explored in the story "Devika", which contributes a great deal to the power of Shauna Singh's stories, is her exploration of the treatment of women, by others, despite their social, economic, religious, cultural or even educational background and location. For one, the response of Devika's husband, when she informs him that Devika "just...flew away", is – "Asha, Devika – all the same to him." (*Devika*: 180). Paradoxically Tania, a model, whom the rich Philip marries for her looks, experiences the same thing; as her husband grows indifferent to her desires, needs and presence and she merely remains his possession, to be showed off, till, in the end, she makes a breakaway, casting off her role as Mrs. Philip Trent, who contemplates ending her life, to becoming Tania, who leaves in her husband's Merc, determined and exhilarated by the thought – "Just imagine Philip's face when he finds his car gone" (*Night of the Leonids*: 177).

This secondary status often accorded to women, in a relationship, is seen also in the treatment of the protagonist in "The Cat Who Cried", by her husband Prem and Mataji, the latter whose approach to her daughter in law is that of a typical Indian mother in law and the former, who wants his wife to abide by all his decisions, including returning permanently to the home left behind; and when she takes her own decision to work and earn, he gives instruction to her office to credit the money into an account that he has opened to save money to return to India.

By itself, defined as a problematic relationship in the Indian context – the mother in law daughter in law relationship is explored in varied contexts and in diverse ways, by Shauna Singh. Whereas in "Nothing Must Spoil This Visit", Chaya is married forcibly to Kamal as against Arvind, by her mother in law, since she was forced to spend a night with him and nobody could know what had happened, in "Only A Button", Olena is harassed by her mother in law all along and in numerous ways, including by kicking up a large fuss over a button, which the mother in law has lost in the daughter in law's home. Not only does Olena's husband support his mother's eccentricity, but does not even hesitate in slapping his wife because she has not been able to take care of her child, search for the button and feed the guests – all at the same time. What is ironical is that even Olena's now grown-up daughter is unable to understand why her mother is still bearing her grandmother a grudge, over only a button.

Not surprisingly, this secondary status dogs women in all kinds of relationships – whether that of a daughter, a mother or even a sister. In fact, women are often so discredited that Simran, in a story by the same name, who is sent to study abroad,

is unable to convince her parents that she is not interested in Mirza (who is a Muslim, as against Simran's family who are Sikhs, thus making the alliance a strict no-no) and her studies are thus aborted mid-way and her parents make arrangements for her luggage to be shipped back to India by informing the hall manager – a decision in which, despite her being educated and an adult, she has no voice or choice.

Against this backdrop, it is not very shocking that in “A Pair of Ears”, Amma, a widow, is cheated of the property, her husband has left her, by her sons and a daughter-in-law, aided by the male cook. The only person who remains loyal to her is her help – an old woman, who, to the extent possible, avenges the death of her mistress.

A similar despair is that experienced by Chandini Kaur as well as the protagonist of “Family Ties”, in a story that embodies a tale within a tale. One of these is that of Chandini Kaur, a Sikh, whose brother, who is also incidentally the protagonist's father, disowns her, because, during India's Partition, she is kidnapped by Muslims and is forcibly married to one of them and with whom she bears a child. When her brother rejects her attempts at returning, Chandini Kaur believes that she will become more acceptable, if she kills her child, given that its father is a Muslim; yet, despite making this sacrifice, she is ‘considered dead’ by her brother and ultimately goes mad. The protagonist of ‘Family Ties’, on the other hand, is constantly nagged by her mother for being fat and having spectacles, which the mother believes will hinder her finding a ‘good’ groom, while her brother, who is wayward and a drug addict, is the apple of his mother's eye and whose father once tells his son that he should kill his sister, instead of allowing her to be kidnapped, as that would taint the family's name.

Despite the many questions that her stories raise, the endings of Shauna Singh's stories do not reflect world weariness, nor do they embody a passive reconciliation to the situation. In fact, her characters either emerge from the situation as better individuals, like Kathleen from “We Are Not in Pakistan”, who from a cynical approach to all those who are not pure whites, though she too has a mixed heritage, attempts to be inclusive and reach out to them, or then take charge of their own lives and set out in search of their own distinct identity, which though separate may not necessarily be separatist.

What lends Shauna Singh's writing its true edge is her ability to harness her memory, to unearth the palimpsest and reach out to and record an alternative history, through her story; and this straddling for her is possible perhaps because, as she says, “I feel at home anywhere and everywhere – perhaps mistakenly :-). You could also believe I'm abroad and an outsider everywhere – depends on your point of view”.

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