

Researcher of souls

INTERVIEW Shauna Singh Baldwin tells ANJANA RAJAN about the events in her own backyard that have contributed to her latest novel

In all my books I'm asking the question — what do you do when no one is watching?" Award winning author Shauna Singh Baldwin, recently in New Delhi for a reading from her latest novel, "The Selector of Souls" (Simon & Schuster), is not speaking of a simple succumbing to temptation. Whether it was the communal bloodshed during the division of India in 1947, or the targeting of Sikhs in 1984, she points out, "The violence was possible because no one was taking responsibility."

But her related question is more troubling: "Is my choice really my own choice or am I being coerced into it by economics, by the need to belong?" So when a woman prefers a son over a daughter, even commits infanticide, is she only succumbing to the desires of the men around her? The aging midwife in "The Selector of Souls" tells her apprentice Damini, "Sometimes we do what men want done, but don't have the courage to do." She also reminds her that "no military in this world fights for women's wishes."

In her poetic prose, the author of "What the Body Remembers" (some of whose characters reappear here though both novels stand alone) weaves history and current affairs, psychology and a good yarn to create a gripping piece of art. If the Partition riots play a big role in the earlier work, it is the 1984 carnage following Indira Gandhi's assassination that has irreversibly touched the characters in "The Selector of Souls". The Babri Masjid demolition, the rise of Right wing politics and its penetration into the middle, upper middle and impoverished strata of society, as well as the role of the Church, all loom into view by turns as the drama unfolds on a stage that swings between the capital city of New Delhi and the Himachal Pradesh hamlet of Gurkot, occasionally shifting scene to Rajasthan or Punjab. The dilemma of its women characters though, seems timeless.

Shauna Singh tells her tales in the many voices of her protagonists. Even knowing that the story of Roop of "What the Body Remembers" (addressed as Mem-saab in this novel) is



HOLDING A MIRROR Shauna Singh Baldwin in New Delhi PHOTO: V.V. KRISHNAN

based on the life of the author's grandmother, one cannot trace a definite autobiographical element in her works. "I don't do autobiographical very well," she reflects. This book, which she describes as "a meditation on creation and destruction," is "probably the closest to my recent emotions."

She likens the process of giving birth to an artist's act of creation. Thus when some years ago, she removed her name from her own work, the play "We Are So Different Now", because she did not agree with its treatment — "a feminist play became a misogynist play — the 'heart wrenching' experience became one of the seeds of the ideas explored in the book. However, she notes, "as an artist you take your own suffering and say what is it like, here is my suffering, whose suffering is it like?"

She maintains, "The autobiographical is only valuable if

it exposes the suffering of others."

The approach seems to run in the true tradition of storytelling. Only on analysing the story do its contributory elements, in the form of her study of history, keen tracking of current affairs and personal exchanges, become apparent. As for the latter, she recalls conversations with prosperous Diaspora Indians who believe in 'purifying' India and Hinduism and approve of intimi-

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dating the minorities. "Hinduism was so elastic. This perversion only started in the '90s," she says. "When you start listening to other people who are very angry at other faiths, it's shocking."

Disturbed by educated people like doctors and stock brokers expressing such views, she says, "To me it is so parallel to what was going on in World War II — Aryan supremacy. That sense of wounded entitlement is a very dangerous thing."

Born in Canada, having grown up in India and currently living in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in the U.S., the author says when a Neo-Nazi attacked her gurdwara (Oak Creek, Wisconsin, 2002) it brought the phenomenon she had been studying in European history and contemporary India into her "own backyard".

Woven into every strand of the story, however, is changing India — not merely in terms of

polarisation of communities but in the technology that has transformed communication. The author says she likes "these moments of change," and feels a significant difference today is women increasingly speaking out. "The all-accepting Indian woman, that's changing."

Fiction may be a mirror of truth but it is not an exact replica. "In fiction, what you do is you run a simulation. Till about halfway through, you're showing this is what life is like." And then, she notes, it is time to show what can be. "So yes," she agrees, "Kamna is very much the hope for the future."

Kamna, the trucker's daughter — who dances, but not the conventional dances — embodies in a sense the free woman, who can say, "This is who I am, like it or lump it." The author says, "We get to that after two children when you're about 50. That's too long."