Why Names Matter

By Shauna Singh Baldwin

If I tell you:

> *The Selector of Souls* is the story of a Hindu midwife and a novice nun who must find ways to overcome their differences so that baby girls can survive .

you'll probably yawn. But if I say:

> *The Selector of Souls* is the story of Damini and Anu who must find ways to overcome their differences so that baby girls can survive.

I think you'll find the second description more interesting. The names are Indian. How many stories have you read about Indian women?

People are named by parents or grandparents, and most societies give a tribal name used as last name. The surname is a father's name, because historically, property passed from father to son. For African-Americans, the last name was often the name of a slave owner. And a person was "called out of his or her name" when he/she was given a name of the slave-owner's choice. The same happened to a lesser extent to colonized non-Europeans. When the British ruled India from 1757 to 1947, they renamed many Indians. And Indians often helped themselves along, adopting Christian names like William, Timmy and Harry.

A name often says: This is who I think I am. Or: This is who I was told I am. Actors and actresses try on new names to become different people. So did many Europeans when they set off to the new world -- genealogy trails often stop short at Ellis Island's database or coffin ship passenger lists.

Trace how many new names are created since about 1900 in the African-American community and you'll feel as if African-Americans are saying, We'll decide who we are. Things and places don't name themselves.

When I was born in Montreal, Canada, my mother received condolence telegrams from family and friends in India, saying, "Don't worry, next time it will be a boy." In response, my feisty mother named me "Shanaaz," meaning, That of Which

Emperors are Proud. I tried all through high school, to make people call me Shanaaz, but my elders would not. It's a Muslim name. My grandparents had fled Muslim mobs in 1947 when India was divided by the British into India and Pakistan. Muslims in Pakistan who fled Hindu and Sikh mobs in 1947 probably felt the same about Hindu and Sikh names.

So I decided around the age of 15 that I would name myself Shauna. I didn't realize it then, but that was a huge step. Naming is claiming. I was claiming myself, my body, my future.

Women are now choosing to keep their maiden name (an old-fashioned term!) but since maiden names are usually a father's name, keeping your maiden name is still passing on a man's name. I didn't have this choice at 24, as my father was so angered by my choosing my own husband and by my choice of husband he said I could no longer use his name. Luckily, my religion offers a choice of last names: Singh, meaning Lion or Kaur meaning Princess. Every Sikh can take these names. I needed to be a Lion and wasn't feeling much like a princess, so I took the name Singh. And when we married, added my husband's Irish-American last name to my own.

But that event caused me to ask myself, who am I if I have no name? And am I a good person because I am good -- or because someone watching knows whose daughter I am and can hold me accountable?

I've been asking these questions ever since, in my stories, through my characters. In *English lessons and other stories*, many stories are titled with just the name of the woman in the story – *Lisa, Jassie, Simran*. I wanted to displace the idea that women are sidekicks in and for men's stories. The process is far from over.

In *What the Body Remembers*, a novel about Roop and Satya, two Sikh women in a polygamous marriage in Occupied India, the story took place in the time when India was divided into India and Pakistan, a time when 17 million people were displaced and became foreigners in their own country overnight. People in India who joined killer mobs in 1947 could hide their deeds in anonymity, as do people

who join gangs and White Power groups. How could Roop save herself when surrounded by such a mob? Only by demanding to know each man's name.

The Tiger Claw is a biographical novel about Noor Inayat Khan, the Muslim woman who became a spy and went in search of her beloved through Occupied France. Imprisoned by the Nazis, and unexpectedly given paper, she writes, to the spirit of her unnamed unborn child, using code names chosen by fellow spies. Codenames speak volumes about self image, and are great fun: an engineer called himself Phono -- the phone was new and cool in the 40s.

In *We Are Not in Pakistan*, several stories were set in non-Indian communities, where character names were foreign to me. For a novella set in the Ukraine, I remember trying to find a woman's name that does not end in A. I couldn't. Gender assumptions are built into naming. For instance, few full-length Christian names like Terry or Tracy can be used for both sexes. Many Sikh names can -- our religion promotes equality, overriding cultural norms.

For stories set in other communities, I asked people how they named children, things and places. Their answers offer new ways of thinking about the self, and about roles of men and women. Ask who has the right to name people and places and learn about the power structure. Could a mother or father name a son Shauna without the boy being bullied at school? Does a city name places after people -- or corporations?

Naming issues became very personal for my next project. I wrote a play *We Are so Different Now,* and the producer decided she couldn't sell it without adding male characters, and showing violence against women on stage. Instead of saying women are strong enough to change things they don't like, my play was now turning the audience into voyeurs of violence and saying women should just grin and bear it. Horrified, I withdrew my name from her production. Most producers would have realized how serious and painful this is for a writer and worked to fix the problem. But the producer just renamed my text and went ahead. My story and characters even appeared off-Broadway. And not a single journalist or reviewer asked, Who wrote this play?

When you're an artist, you can't say "poor me." Instead it's your job to ask: whose suffering is this like? How can I translate this experience into some beautiful and lasting creation that will help others? I thought of people who created something beautiful as I had, but felt they had created a "mistake."

In many areas of the world girl children are considered a mistake. Hence 160 million girls are missing in the world since the 1970s. Families, primarily in India and China, have been using amniocentesis then ultrasound, and now In-vitro Fertilization (IVF) and Prenatal Genetic Diagnosis (PGD), to select boy children and abort girls. A husband who feels a girl child will be his financial ruin might threaten to withdraw his name if a girl is born, and with no facility, legal requirement for paternity testing, or child support enforcement, a wife may have no choice but to seek an ultrasound and girl-abortion. How does a woman feel if it's a choice between her survival and her child's or grandchild's survival? How can someone sacrifice one family member so the rest can survive?

Whose suffering would be similar but larger than my own when my creation turned into something harmful? I asked myself how a mother would feel if her son learned how much easier it is to destroy than to create, and turned into a flag-worshipping nationalist, raped someone, or destroyed something?

When you write fiction it's not enough to ask, How does it feel?, because what you'll get is mere acting on the page. And for the first half of a story, that's necessary. But ultimately, I want my story to show how people braver than I can and do change patterns and situations that appear hopeless. What strategies are women are using that I wouldn't dream of using in North America? What's working?

Questions lead to more questions when you're paying attention to your own thoughts, reading, learning, and describing. From interviewing and researching, I learned that South Korea, the only country that has been able to reverse the trend and reduce sex selection, has allowed and promoted the idea that a woman's family name can be passed down to a child. It will be even more difficult to untrain boys and men who have been taught – mostly by women -- never to allow themselves to be called weak, girlish or gay, but they are attacking that

pride in the tribe that turns women and children into second-rate things with price tags attached. And saying that having the same last name doesn't mean you must endorse every action of a family member.

Inhabiting imaginary friends, a Hindu midwife named Damini and a Christian novice Anu, I set off into the safe space of the blank page to learn how women create in the face of their own devaluation, when the world has told them they are not even worth bringing into this world. Damini and Anu may be just names for women I've met who survive and resist the devaluation of their creations, but they have helped me understand complex pressures on women, on men, that make sex selection a world problem, one that can lead to nuclear war. Through them, I hope readers will enjoy the strategies women use to creatively change sustaining traditions, find joy and provide healing in the midst of trauma.

1648 words

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Damini, *a short story adapted from Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel* The Selector of Souls *was long-listed for the CBC Literary Award in Feb 2011. The novel, published by Random House in Sept 2012, received the 2012 Anne Powers Fiction Award.*