



LETTER FROM

# Milwaukee

by Shauna Singh Baldwin

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## Fear of the Feminine

The poet Rumi said, “Your true country is not where you are, but where you are going.” He wanted us to think about the afterlife, because what we believe affects our actions. But even Rumi could only guess and theorize what lies on the other side. Like the next moment, the afterlife is unknowable. We can, however, make educated guesses about the country we’re creating: the near future



*As a storyteller, I create and explore situations where people find they must change, and make moral choices in favor of alternatives that work better. For *The Selector Of Souls*, though I didn't know it when I began chasing images and voices seven years ago, I've been exploring what happens when a society denies or fears "feminine" values: inclusion, altruism, compassion, creativity, nurturing, caring and co-operation.*

Girls and women are the embodiment of values we term feminine, and men have a feminine side too even if they are raised to fear and deny it. In my latest novel *Damini*, a grandmother at 50, has learned fear of the feminine only too well, and we enter her world when she commits a terrible crime, giving the justifications of her society as she does it. She tries to redeem herself by working at a clinic and becoming a midwife on the side. But she finds herself in deeper trouble, because women's wishes can so often be guided, coerced, or dictated by men and family members.

The family in Asia and the Middle East is our comfort and bulwark in bad times, the provider for elders, children and the unemployed. The family home and land have been key to survival, but globalization and liberalization have taken a toll on the ethics of property-owners. In India, as real estate values soared during the 1990s, sons like Amanjit and parents like Mem-saab in *The Selector of Souls* sued one another in court for control of property. Many women



became afraid to divorce in case their children were disinherited.

When the family becomes solely a business entity, the vulnerable are in danger – children, the disabled, older adults, caregivers. Since independence, Indian law has placed families above individuals, privileging men, relegating women and children to secondary status, and setting the stage for discrimination. The preference for sons works in tandem with a societal taboo against taking from a married daughter or her family. And at some moment in 1980s India, traditional

son-preference became daughter-aversion. When the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen first brought the issue to light in 1990, conventional wisdom was that Indians in rural areas neglected girls, mistreated women, and must be discriminating with pre-natal selection against girls. But further research showed it was property-owning, educated, often upper-caste Indians who, with help from well-paid ultrasound clinics and doctors, had eliminated millions of females.

Today I would ask Rumi: in our post-post colonial world, if the family has

become a place of danger for girls and women, where can we go? When a woman cannot trust her relatives to honor her body, where is her true country? When the family becomes a space of forced and unpaid labor for a woman, where is her true country? When the family becomes a center of punishment, from shunning to murder, for infractions of its economic interests or honor, where is a woman's true country?

**Conservatives in Canada** jumped on sex selection when my latest book was published in October, as a wedge to



reopen the legal issue of a woman's right to abortion. But sex selection to prevent "gender disappointment" and for "family balancing" is practiced differently in North America – non-Asian families who can afford it use in-vitro fertilization and pre-natal genetic determination to select against boys. Either way, discrimination is unjust and unbalances the population.

But in tribal societies the status of mothers depends on producing sons. In an overpopulated country, economics can make selective abortion seem desirable, normal, and even a patriotic duty. As my Indian midwife Damini learns, all a man (and his family) need to do to persuade a woman to abort a girl is to refuse the baby a name. Beliefs in reincarnation become a most useful excuse – nothing truly dies. Duty to Family becomes another. But it is inhumane when girls don't stand a chance and women reject members of their own sex.

**In the boom** time of 1990s India, demographers estimate 3.1 million girls went missing from the population, and another four million from 2001-2008. In this era of commoditization, women's wombs could be rented for surrogate motherhood, compassion could be bought as medical tourism began, and a boy baby could be purchased for 50,000 rupees (\$1,000). But if we ascribe son-preference to the lack of social security in India, it becomes difficult to explain why Indian immigrants to social-security-provider countries like Canada and

the US and a new prosperous middle class of Indians are still winnowing girls.

Patriarchy demands that men fear feminine values. Vikas, a character in *The Selector Of Souls*, fears that kindness will seem weakness. He's completely in tune with the hyper-masculinization of his society and feels proud when India nuclearizes in 1998. He was raised not to

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be a man, but to be not-woman. That stunts his ability to care, nurture and give, and causes him to forgo the experience of his daughter's childhood.

Non-Asians look at prenatal sex selection statistics with pity, disgust and self-congratulation. The problem seems very far removed. But only a few businesses in the world have names like "Alexander and Daughters". Even in non-South Asian communities, the tradition is for weddings

to be paid for by the woman's parents. And for a man, the birth of a son can be felt as more of a celebration than that of a daughter.

On tour for this novel I was often asked: what can be done to improve a girl's chances of being born? When I said that one solution that my characters found was to encourage mothers to use their family names

for a child, several male journalists had an instinctive negative reaction, regardless of heritage. A pathology of discrimination against the feminine runs deep. Long before DNA testing, norms for the perpetuation of the tribe required control of women's sexuality. Today we don't remember that control of reproduction is convenient and desirable for the family. Instead, we blame "tradition" for injustices wrecked on individuals – both men and women. The patriarchy, more than selfish genes, seems to have a mind and purpose of its own.

**Masculine values** have, in many countries, made military spending an objective in itself, along with creating a parallel economy of military education, health and retirement pensions. American presidential

candidates in the November 2012 election spoke about the threat of Iran getting nuclear weapons even as they ignored the rise of vicious majoritarians in India and Pakistan, traditionally hostile two hostile nuclear-armed countries.

I agree with Rumi – our true country cannot be where we are today. But as Damini and the novice nun Anu find in *The Selector of Souls*, if only masculine values prevail, the land where we are heading to will have many single men brought up to be little maharajas, leading to incest, kidnappings and war. How can we include faith, love, altruism, compassion, connection and nurturing in that future space?

If you follow Damini on her journey toward redemption and a renewed appreciation of feminine values, and on Anu's path toward self-awareness, I hope you'll be inspired by the tactics they use to change their society. Like them, I hope you'll feel the need to select and perpetuate traditions that promote justice and equality. Because, a decade later, the number of missing girls worldwide has risen to 160 million since the 1970s and is rising with prosperity. We can no longer afford the passivity of hope or the luxury of pessimism. ●

Shauna Singh Baldwin is a Montreal-born writer whose *What the Body Remembers* won the Commonwealth Prize for Best Book (Canada-Caribbean) and who received the Friends of American Writers prize for *English Lessons & Other Stories*. *The Selector of Souls* is her sixth book. ► [ShaunaSinghBaldwin.com](http://ShaunaSinghBaldwin.com)

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