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RE-DISCOVERING THE SELF: DIASPORIC DIMENSIONS IN THE WORKS OF SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN

This article revises the notions of diaspora and cultural identity, and offers a rethinking on the question of ethnicity and multiculturalism and how the author, Shauna Singh Baldwin, contributes to the diaspora. Baldwin's works are evinced by the manner in which they have taken diverse paths to reach the goal of "belonging to the society and country of her choice." This article concentrates on the question: Do women in diasporic communities in Canada suffer from a double subordination? Since being diasporic is a matter of personal choice, at least in the initial years, the journey through life becomes an exploration of alternative modes of adjustment. For Baldwin, writing on India through fiction is a matter of education and self-exploration, imagining India from faraway Canada. The voices from within, such as Baldwin's add to the richness and diversity of the culture of the new homeland. The figurative interaction between the diaspora and the writer leads to an understanding of the other, signposting a social dialogue within multicultural communities.

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AS THE BORDERS OF NATIONS BECAME SOFTER WITH the arrival of a new wave of globalisation in the twentieth-century, scholars began to study the engagements of people across nations by employing fresh theoretical approaches. Viewed from the Canadian perspective, the scholarly preoccupation has been with understanding the formation of ethnic identity within the “familiar themes of ethnic persistence/retention and incorporation.”¹ The immigrants that form a significant part of Canada’s population had to redefine both their historical legacies and their present geographic and social realities. The Indian diaspora in Canada dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, when the first Sikh settlers moved to Canada in 1903. Most of these early settlers had been members of the British army, and for many the migration to Canada was the second stage in the process of moving out of India.

This paper revises the idea of diaspora and cultural identity, offering a rethinking on the question of ethnicity and multiculturalism by exploring how Shauna Singh Baldwin (born in Montréal in 1962), the writer, poet, playwright and radio producer, problematises and contributes to Canadian diaspora. The idea of diaspora itself has evolved in such a way that has radically changed the literary landscape of Canadian literature. The diasporic imaginary is crucially connected to the idea of “homing desire” that is defined by the denial of the fact that the homelands of diasporas are themselves contaminated, which, in turn, implies that because diasporic existence occurs at multiple levels, the diasporic identity is itself fractured or fragmented. In an increasingly multiethnic formation of the nation-states like Canada, diasporic theory bears evidence to the fact that we live in a world where multi-ethnic and multi-communal states are the norm. Against the discursive nostalgia, the history of diaspora leads us to deterritorialise peoples with a history and a future. We thus try to weave a narrative that requires a theory of homeland as a centre that can either be reconstituted or imaginatively offered as the point of origin. People without a homeland or a sense of the “unhomely” (that refers to the estranged sense of encountering something familiar yet threatening

1 Daphne N. Windland, “‘Our Home and Native Land,’ Canadian Ethnic Scholarship and the Challenge of Transnationalism,” *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 35, no. 4 (1998): 662-63.

which lies within the bounds of the intimate) is a cultural construction of late modernity. To put it differently, the positive side of diaspora is a democratic ethos of equality that does not give concession to any particular community in a nation; its negative side is vituperative racism and widespread nativism. Homelands interact with other cultures to produce diaspora over a period of time. Against the fictions of a heroic past and a distant land, the real history of diasporas is always contaminated by the social processes that govern their lives. Thus, diasporic identities are intimately connected to the concepts of cultural identity and nation. As Stuart Hall comments, identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as one might think. Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, identity should be thought of as a “production” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within representation. This view problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term “cultural identity” lays claim.

There are two ways of thinking about cultural identity; the first arrangement defines cultural identity in terms of a shared culture, a sort of collective “one true self.” Within the terms of this definition, cultural identities of the diasporic people reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes that provide them, as “one people,” with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of their actual day-to-day history. There is, however, a second, related but different view of cultural identity, which recognises that besides the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference, which constitutes what really they are or, rather, what they have become. The diasporic people cannot speak for very long about one experience, one identity, without acknowledging ruptures and discontinuities. Cultural identity, in this sense, is a matter of becoming, as well as of being. It belongs to the future as well as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. It is only from this

second position that we can properly understand the traumatic character of the colonial experience.²

The past, therefore, continues to speak to us. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the unstable points of identification, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. It is not an essence but a positioning. The construction of identity is itself a continuous process, and often both ambiguous and contradictory. It is precisely because of this factor that the present paper raises the issues of identity and the Indian diaspora in Canada. The diasporic experience is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity that lives with and through difference, essentially by hybridity. This concept of cultural difference is deeply rooted in the evolving concept of national communities. Our belongingness constitutes, in the words of Benedict Anderson, “an imagined community.”³ Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. Nations, Anderson suggests, are not only sovereign political entities but also imagined constructs. How do we imagine their relation to home, the nature of their belongingness? How are we to conceptualise or imagine identity, difference and belongingness after diaspora? Since cultural identity carries so many overtones of essential unity, how are we to “think” identities inscribed within relations of power and constructed across difference, and disjuncture?

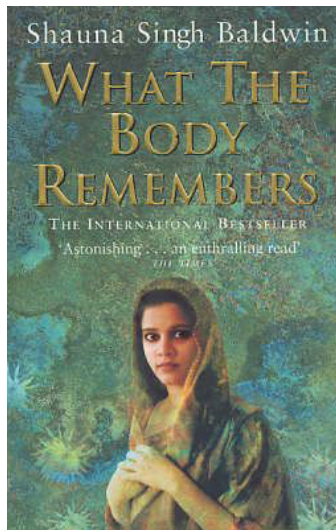
I begin this discussion with the first novel of Shauna Singh Baldwin *What the Body Remembers* (1999). Translated into fourteen languages, it won the 2000 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for the Canada/Caribbean region, and was also long-listed for the Orange Prize in Fiction.⁴ Roughly spanning the two decades leading up to the Partition of India, the novel tells the story of Roop, the daughter of Bachan Singh, a man with some clout in the border

2 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. J. Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 236-37.

3 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

4 Shauna Singh Baldwin, *What the Body Remembers* (London: Penguin, 1999).

village of Pari Darwaza in pre-Partition Punjab. Influenced from a young age by the inevitability of marriage and children, sixteen-year-old Roop accepts a proposal from the middle-aged landowner, Sardarji, whose first wife, Satya, has no issue. A rivalry between the two develops; the enraged older wife Satya commits suicide shortly before Partition, and after her death Roop and Sardarji, finding themselves within the boundaries of the newly drawn country of Pakistan, journey across the border to India to start a new life.



Baldwin's synoptic novel of almost five hundred pages offers a thick description of this border community, dwelling on the gendered processes of Sikh subjectification, and particularly on the ways in which men and women are enjoined to "remember" community through both narrative and embodied acts. The final moments of violence in the novel are to be read within this pre-set framework, wherein Baldwin explores the many kinds of memory that gendered bodies create for the communal body.

Ernst Renan famously wrote over a century ago, "[f]orgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation."⁵ On the contrary, nations are imagined by the creative and

5 Ernst Renan, "What Is a Nation?" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 11.

often inventive activity of collective remembering. Thus, Benedict Anderson writes that nations inevitably seem to “loom out of an immemorial past”; so crucial is that sense of “hoary antiquity” to the existence of nations that history and tradition are often, as Eric Hobsbawm has observed, simply invented.⁶ Articulating these insights on nation, community, and gendered bodies, *What the Body Remembers* dramatises the regenerative impulses of the community via double themes of storytelling and sexual reproduction, two parallel modes of “remember-ing” through which the Sikh community in the novel perpetuates itself psychically and physically. Both modes of remembering, Baldwin suggests, are deeply gendered and embodied, and certainly the novel’s title speaks to its close examination of gendered bodies as the material repositories as well as producers of collective memory.

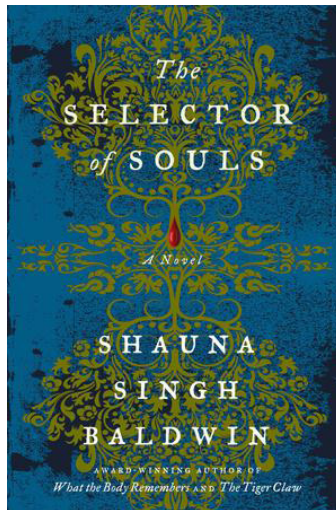
Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *English Lessons and Other Stories* (1999) focuses on the previously uncared-for Sikh male as the subject of its narrative.⁷ The construction of Sikh masculinity is mapped onto the wider chronological contexts of immigration to North America, and globalisation and consumerism in India. In Sikhism, the Khalsa male, because of his turban, is the marked body signalling distinction; in the diaspora, the religious marker of the turban shapes the performance of a specific kind of gendered identity and defines the manner in which integration into a religious, cultural, and ethnic identity takes place. The family, specifically the hetero-normative one, is at the heart of the performance, the pedagogy, and the continuity of specific notions of a religio-cultural masculinity, which speaks sometimes in recital with, and sometimes against, the feminist grain. Religious identifications such as the turban that bear the moral burden of older value systems and notions of masculinity and femininity collide with changing survival systems, and women and men may have to negotiate different ethical compasses.

Shauna Singh Baldwin first heard the mysterious story of Noor Inayat Khan (codename *Madeleine*) at The Safe House, an espionage-themed restaurant in Milwaukee. A former Dutch spy told her of the brave and

6 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 11; and Eric Hobsbawm, introduction to *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

7 Shauna Singh Baldwin, *English Lessons and Other Stories* (London: Penguin, 1996).

beautiful Indo-American woman who left her family in London to become a spy in Nazi-occupied France during the Second World War. The story at once intrigued Baldwin, inspiring her to travel to Europe, searching for the places where Noor lived, interviewing the people who knew her, and finding out more about the enigmatic woman. This resulted in her novel *The Tiger's Claw* (2005) that speaks of the life of Noor. Noor's mother was an American from Boston who married a Sufi musician and teacher from India. Growing up in France, Noor was extremely close to her liberal Muslim father, but when he died, Noor's conservative uncle Tajuddin and her brother Kabir took over the family.



Uncle Tajuddin and Kabir disapprove of Noor's love for Armand, and as the men of the family in 1930s France, they have the legal right to stop her engagement. Noor is faced with the choice between defying her family and turning against her heart. She stops seeing Armand, but is devastated and lonely. Once the war begins, Noor's family heads to England while Armand's family stays behind. When Germany invades France, Noor despairs of ever seeing Armand again, until Kabir unwittingly introduces her to his new friend who is recruiting bilingual women for the resistance. Noor is offered training, and she accepts. She will help defeat the Germans, but her true purpose will be to find and reunite with Armand.

As a resistance agent, Noor trains to be a radio operator, taking on a second identity—Nora Baker—one of the many names she will ultimately assume. When she arrives in France, she plays Anne-Marie Régnier, a woman caring for her sick aunt, and to other spies in her resistance network, she is known as Madeleine. She has clandestine rendezvous with other agents, transmits messages from various safe houses, and risks capture at every turn. She rents an apartment across the street from Drancy, the concentration camp where she knows Armand is being held. At great peril, she sends him a message—the tiger-claw pendant she always wears for luck and courage.

The Selector of Souls (2016) opens in the distant mountain town of Gurkot, where we find grandmother Damini with her newborn granddaughter. She is forcing the little girl child to gulp tobacco. Set in India in the mid-1990s, it opens with this ghastly scene. Damini's daughter Leela and her husband, poor rural labourers, already have a daughter. The question of bringing up another daughter is unbearable for them. They are not in a financial position to afford dowry for the two daughters. The girl's father becomes upset and hence refuses to name her, and her mother refuses to feed her. As Damini performs this heinous crime, she offers prayers to the goddess of the cave that her future actions in life will wash the "stain" on her karma and that the little child's atman (soul) will "take shape when this world is a better place for girls."

Even though *The Selector of Souls* is mainly about the way girls/women are treated in India, it also touches upon themes such as religion, religious atrocities, caste and the bitter Indo-Pakistan relations. Before she came to live with Leela, Damini lived in New Delhi, where she worked as a maid for thirty years under a deaf employer, Memsaab. While the narrative describes her as Memsaab Roop, Damini calls her "Mem-saab"—with a hyphen. Memsaab Roop is the young second wife brought in to provide her Sikh husband with a child in Baldwin's first novel, *What the Body Remembers*. After the death of Mem-saab, her avaricious son, Amanjit, gets rid of Damini. After losing her job, Damini was left with no other option than to join Leela and her son-in-law. Alongside Damini's story, Baldwin weaves the story of Anu, a Hindu-Christian, who is in an unsuccessful marriage. Anu has now sent her daughter to Toronto to her cousin. Surprisingly, her husband does not

object, as he never wanted a daughter in the first place. After the departure of her daughter, Anu files for divorce and becomes a nun with the local Catholic order. She then comes to Gurkot to work at the convent health clinic.

In Gurkot, Damini and Anu come together. Anu is sympathetic to Damini's poor condition, however she is in dark about the fact that Damini is receiving commissions from the local fertility clinic. She arranges for women to come in for ultrasounds and, depending on the result, "cleanings." Damini is trained as a midwife. The Church has its own set of rules and regulations that irks Anu. Eventually, she seeks her own path towards social justice.

Baldwin touches upon certain cultural issues. Her delineation of the survival tactics of her characters—switching religions or ignoring caste when it is convenient is quite enlightening. However, there is a general gloom that hangs like a cloud in the novel, which is quite suffocating. Singh Baldwin's style is realistic. She does not romanticise India. Rather, her India is an atrocious, unforgiving place where girls are treated as doormats not only by men but also by women.

In *Reluctant Rebellions* (2016), Baldwin brings a new perspective and voice to Canadian public discourse in a compilation of fifteen of her speeches and essays delivered and written between 2001 and 2015. She writes straight from her personal journey as a writer and a South Asian woman who needs to "become as hyphenated as possible." Baldwin transcends homogenised national identities. The question of what it is to be at home arises when she presents the experience of the South Asian diaspora as a life of dislocation seeded in a history of transplantings. The landscape of memory becomes a more noteworthy place of habitation than the real place and the South Asians' way of life is characterised by ambivalence. The remains of the past are also frequently assembled by the imagination to form a new, and kaleidoscopic, design that, to quote Homi Bhabha's words, "does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present."⁸

8 Homi K. Bhabha, introduction to *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 4.

Interest in Baldwin's novels centres not on the liminality of the Indian settler, on his anxieties of ethnicity, but, rather, on his incessant crossing of ethnic and cultural boundaries; the Indians who have made Australia and New Zealand their home, whether Hindu or Muslim, may be deeply rooted in their individual cultural traditions, which originated in India, but they themselves do not look back at India. Nowhere in these novels do we see a present that is unmarked by the past. They serve primarily as a frame that the narrative throws around a multilayered recollection of the event being described. No place is significant except insofar as it is like or unlike other places. Baldwin's use of the multigenerational saga is a crucial manifestation of the immigrant narrative's continuous project of straddling several times, spaces, and languages. As the narrative maps the lives and travels of several generations, it also marks the changing political map of the world in which these generations live.

Nevertheless, Baldwin's point above foregrounds the need to assess the extent to which Canada's great promise of inclusion is effectively operating. The inclusion of Baldwin's texts in Canadian university courses reveals a desire to break with the institutional perpetuation of rigid categories and indicate the role that literature can play in moving 'beyond' such limits. On the one hand, the construction of Canadian literature as an *inter-national* body levels the field for writers and recognises a commonality that is always differently expressed. As Canada continues to evolve, the inclusion of all kinds of immigrant writings (and not only those of literary prize winners like Ondaatje, Mistry and Vassanji) may indicate the arrival of the great 'mosaic.' On the other hand, the shifting nature of the South Asian diaspora has drawn new and rigid borders sometimes impossible to trespass. Where is home? What is a nation? What ought to be considered national literature? These questions remain significant in today's Canada.