

Re-exploring Religious Fanaticism and Aestheticism in the Novels of Shauna Singh Baldwin



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Abstract :- One cannot and should not dismiss the role of religion in the human psyche. A true religion is always aesthetic in its own way as no religion teaches us enmity and superstition rather they preach us of humanity. It is an Irony that most of the fanatics have moulded and misinterpreted the teachings of their holy books for their own convenience and benefit. These two ways of accepting religious ideology result in a different way. One is the way towards violence and blind faith while other is the face of true religion and shows the hidden beauty of it.

In her three novels, *Shauna Singh Baldwin*, depicted the true aestheticism in religion and also mentioned those fundamentalists who are spreading hatred taking the shelter of religion. She explored the complexities of religious understanding within the mankind. The intent of this research paper is to re-explore her novels on the basis of the two religious faces and how it is affecting human mind. It also intends to depict the aestheticism in religious pluralism demonstrated by Baldwin in her fiction.

Keywords :- Religion, Aestheticism, Fanaticism, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Fiction, Indian English Literature

Shauna Singh Baldwin, a Canadian writer of Indian origin, was born in 1962 in Montreal, Canada but grown up in India and completed her graduation from Delhi university. She wrote three novels that deal with Variant themes. She has shown her staunch view point towards religion explaining all major and minor rituals and perceptions of different communities and touched almost every single religion in her fiction like Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Christians and even Jews. Her main pivot was to show the difference between pure religion and fanaticism when she discussed about any particular ideology. Her first prize winning novel *What the Body Remembers* is a partition novel but what makes it different from any other partition novel is that, it is from the perception of a Sikh woman, *Roop* who firstly struck in a polygamy and after that struggled to save herself and her children from those who were shading blood all around in the name of partition. As Baldwin is a Sikh by religion, so her very first novel largely grounded on the Sikh religion and its beauty. She, so aptly and finely depicted the rituals and the customs of her religion that the reader would love to be a part of them.

She didn't even hesitate on using some Punjabi words in the novel whenever she felt that no word can define the feelings better. She had a great influence of *Guru Granth Sahib* in her life and it is clearly visualized in the novel.

Although her main focus was on the Sikh women but she didn't miss any opportunity to beautify other religions according to her characters' dwelling. There are many instances in the novel that will show her love and interest towards every religion. She compared Roop's hair with the togetherness and strong bond of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. Her hair's three split ups are like these three religions and although they are separate but still are combined-

“Roop is a new Sikh, then, an uncomprehending carrier of orthodoxy resurging in them all. Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, they are like the three strands of her hair, a strong rope against the British, but separate nevertheless.” (WTBR 06)

How beautifully all the religions found their place, has also been examined through the framework of *Vayu* (the Wind) as he has been everywhere since the generations and even before the generations. A fine description of '*Vayu*' who has witnessed everything happened in the past and is happening in the present; has also been addressed. She explained about the Gods of different religions and their teachings that '*Vayu*' has witnessed. With the help of '*Vayu*', she told the readers about *Mahavira Jain*, *Gautama Buddha*, *Prophet Muhammad* and *Guru Nanak*-

“..... it was Vayu who swept the ground before Mahavira Jain, Heard the first lessons of non-violence. He listened in awe as Gautama Buddha taught Buddhism's eightfold path, saved Buddha's ideas, puffing them out of reach of Hinduism, to sanctuary in the Himalayas and Tibet. Then, When Islam first sank its roots in Punjab, Vayu shifted direction, bringing the Prophet Muhammad's revelations of Allah to sway the hearts of raja and menials alike, melding languages again—Prakrit and Persian to Urdu..... He saw Nanak lead the first Sikhs to a single faceless God, and gather into the Sikh quom those who would seek the divine with him...” (WTBR 24)

Baldwin also gave a minor introduction to the Sikh festivals and Muslim prayers. This novel focuses on the religions of India before independence and is enriched with so many religious ideas and rituals that one could feel a bit closer to every religion. Where there is an aestheticism in religion there are also few people who impose their own religious ideology narrating their own interpretation from the holy books like the two faces of a coin. Roop's father Bachan Singh is a Hindu by birth but his father took an oath to grow his first son as a Sikh and name him Bachan, whenever he would be blessed by a son. When Roop's father scolds her for always going to Hindu temples and for reading Ramayana, then Roop feels that she has never forgotten all five 'Ks' and all the teachings of Guru Nanak that make her the perfect Sikh. Roop's father didn't understand how a religion decorates anyone but his fundamental ideology made his family members inferior. What

Baldwin here wanted to explain that one must not impose other to whom they should follow or not. Accepting the beauty in every culture is what one should adorn and imposing can only create a distance. It seems that Roop and Madani (her elder sister) are sometimes more in sense than the elders as for them; there are no grudges between any religions. Huma is a Muslim but for them, she is only a good friend with whom they enjoy playing but for the elders, she is an untouchable. A Heated argument between Revati Bhua and Gujri started when Revati Bhua suggested Gujri to purify the kitchen with Cow urine as Huma had entered there. But Gujri argued that it is a Hindu ceremony and while they are Sikh so they must purify the kitchen with Ganga Jal as it is a Sikh method of purifying anything. This incidence clearly shows the contrast between the mentality of the elders and the young ones.

Other than focusing on the negatives, she has also focused on some beautiful and delightful religious moments. As she belongs to the Sikh community, so we would also notice a beautiful Punjabi rhyming which Roop and Madani are chanting while playing 'kikli' with Huma-

“Kikli kaleer di
Pug mere vir di
Dupatta merey bhai da
Phphitney muhn javaida”. (WTBR 77)

A hidden beauty and joy of childhood is rendering in the above lines and Baldwin beautifully portrayed Punjabi rhyming and it is accurately fitting in the situation. Baldwin shows the irony of India before independence where religious fanaticism became the main criteria of creating differences and the ultimate cause of these differences caused partition. The differences between the mindsets of different communities took greater shape during partition. The people of India that time were so much indulged and engrossed in only two communities- Hindu and Muslim that they ignored the Sikh people by not ignoring them as for them the Sikh were with Hindus and whatever any Hindu would intake that must be taken by the Sikh also. Baldwin openly put the issue of that India where different communities of people live but ironically all were ignored in between the silent grudges of Hindus and Muslims before partition and when there grudges took the shape of partition, Sikh and other communities were again ignored as people who were Muslims could migrate to new country, Pakistan and Hindu could remain in India and the people of other community can migrate to anywhere they want though people believed that the Sikh would eventually be with the Hindus. Baldwin is totally against partition and one of the major causes of partition was the problems between Hindus and Muslims. As the Satyagraha for independence was increasing day by day, the malice between the different religions was also increasing. The British were somehow had been successful in their '*Divide and Rule policy*', and this policy took the biggest face of partition.

The protagonist of '*What the Body Remembers*' was a Sikh woman, Roop and so her second novel '*The Tiger Claw*' deals with the life of British occupied spy, Noor Inayat Khan who was a

Muslim by religion. It is a spy thriller holding the theme of love during the World War II. She became a spy for Britain just to find her love, Armand who was a Jew. In this novel, Baldwin pointed out that how the two lovers are apart just because of their religious diversities. Noor's brother, Kabir hated Armand because he was a Jew. This hatred for Jews increased when Hitler ordered to kill Jews everywhere. No one was giving them shelter because of the fear of Hitler. Noor was a hybrid of many cultures just like Baldwin. Her father was a Sufi musician, her mother was an American and her lover was a Jew. Her own family had a picture of religious diversity but still they were not ready to accept Armand for Noor because their fundamentalist notion was not allowing them to accept any Jew. Here is the beautiful illustration of Sufi ideology that Noor used to love and yes she was not at all amongst those religious fanatics and pretenders-

“... Angela listened as he vowed, when the war was over, to return to France and spend the rest of his life a travelling curator, exhibiting Abbajaan's Sufi ideas: peace, love, tolerance. Above all, tolerance-the simplest idea, the most difficult to teach.” (TC 26)

Although her father was a Sufi musician and he himself preached Noor about love, peace and tolerance but when the time came to take a stand on his own teachings; he clearly showed the difference between his words and deeds. It was religious aestheticism in the Sufi ideology but it was a religious fanaticism in the deeds of her father who could preach but could not implement. The difference between these two faces is beautifully portrayed by Baldwin. While writing a letter to her imaginative child whom she was referring as '*ma petite*' in the jail of Pforzheim, Germany, Noor expresses her views on the teachings of her father-

“I didn't fully believe Uncle's threat, for I still believed in my family's love, in my Abbajaan's teachings that all religions are equal paths to a Universal God, like many roads to the Ka'aba.” (TC 75)

Here it is clearly expressed that for Noor, no religion is different and every religion has only one motive, i.e. to know the path of our Universal God and to admire him. What her father taught her was not implemented by him but was followed by her daughter as she had an intellectuality to judge what a pure religion means. From the two divergent paths, Noor decided to go to the path '*less travelled*' as only few has a courage to stand in all odds.

Baldwin's third novel, '*The Selector of Souls*' is against abortion and gender selection. The theme of religion is differently tackled here according to her previous novels. In her first novel, there was a huge discussion of Sikh religion and their rituals with the minor description of Hindu and Muslim religions and the silent animosity between them that led to the Partition. It dealt with the religion before independence. In her second novel, Baldwin mainly focused on Muslim and Jews and it dealt with the situation of Jews in the World War II. In her last novel she focused on every

religion including Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christianity etc. and it deals with the religion after independence. Although we were independent but still were not free from our thoughts and perceptions. Here we would find a plenty of discussion about the rituals of Hindu religion. Baldwin bravely spoke out about that Hindu rituals which people mostly do not want to discuss because of its controversial status, like pouring milk on idols and wasting it rather than giving it to needed one. People of Uttarakhand would relate to this novel as it has a reference of the Lord of Justice, Golunath Ji and an imaginary Goddess of Himalayas, Anamika Devi. Besides presenting the drawbacks of Hindu religion she has also explored the beauty of faith in God amongst the people of hilly areas and how they worship their God with unbreakable faith. When *Damini* committed a crime by enforcing a baby girl to swallow tobacco a baby girl because her parents didn't want that girl to be the part of their life, she prayed that may the Lord of Justice, Golunath condone her wrong deed and give peace to the 'atman' (soul) of that baby girl though she herself was in crime. The protagonist, Anu seems like a shadow of Baldwin as she is also a hybrid of three cultures and with her Sikh religion she has also accepted Christianity. In this novel, Anu is portrayed as a Hindu but she is baptized and became a Christian. We would also see her desire to become a nun. She is an open minded woman and after getting divorce from her cruel husband, she joins Christ Church, Shimla to become a nun. The people who have a clear understanding of what an actual religion is could know the beauty of the religious pluralism and in *oneness*. Like Noor in *The Tiger Claw*, Anu also gave preference to the single power though she was living around the fundamentalists. According to her, rituals and perceptions of different religions may be different but they are somehow similar, as we can understand it in the following lines-

"Anu writes the numeral one in gurmukhi script, then a three as if beginning an "om". She extends its tail up, and over to join the beginning. One more arc jumping from there, and it becomes "Ik Onkar," symbol of the Sikhs." (SS 44)

In her first novel, Baldwin highlighted the theme of *oneness* in multi-religious country with the help of Roop's hair strands and here in this novel she illustrated it with one 'Om' word that is not just a word but the entity and the power adjoining all the faith. She also put forward the perception of a theist about any statue worshiping as it is just a matter of faith and passion to believe and not to believe. It doesn't mean that a person, who is not into any idol worshiping process, is following a wrong ideology. Goddess Anamika Devi, whom Damini called just a terracotta pot, is constantly giving her strength to bear everything in her imagination. Damini believes in her and for her, Anamkia Devi is the strength for every female and as she is also a female, she can understand the situation of Damini better. Here Baldwin logically and beautifully explained the value of a pot for a theist and an atheist-

"To one who doesn't believe, a pot is just a pot. But to one who believes, a pot becomes the goddess." (SS 188)

Baldwin purely and without being bias, explained all the strong and weak points of different religious rituals. She also discussed about the issue of cow slaughter and how according to Hindu religion it is a crime. Swami Rudransh, on TV is talking about cow slaughter and telling everyone that how it is shameful that Muslims slaughters cow. The appearance of Swami Rudransh is a satire on the fake saints who are the main cause of people's wrong religious ideas and they are the one spreading hatred for other communities. One must not impose one's religious ideology to the other person as all are free to select their own rituals. Religion doesn't teach us to force and subjugate and through this character the mirror has been shown by the author that how most of the people believe in these types of fake saints who only have a malice idea for other religion.

“..... Hindus, he is saying very gently and calmly, must protect the cow from slaughter. Muslims, he says, are slaughtering cows and getting rich tanning leather, selling it abroad. He is saying Muck-dun-alds company has been granted permission by the government to come to India. But they will slaughter cows and make their customers eat beef. Shameful, he says, and quotes Mahatma Gandhi, “Because the cow is my mother. The cow is everyone's mother. They should ask its blessing, never slaughter it.” (SS 233-234)

Anu on the other hand was listening to him very carefully and the tendency of limiting other religion was not accepted by her. She analyzed his every word in her mind and reached to a point asking some questions to the Swami as the word *'Mother'* was distracting her. His words were making her to think and re-think about every aspect through the spectacles of her own. In her psych, she asked some random questions to him like *'What can that swami know about mothers?'* and if they don't slaughter them *'... will they look after old cows?'*

Baldwin very gently expressed her views and ideas about different communities and also briefly discussed about the religious aestheticism still in existence because of some not blinded people. How religious fanaticism is killing the aestheticism in every way is what Baldwin tried to deal with. Talking about religion especially about Indian diversity is not a small thing to deal with when one is living in abroad as some objections has been raised in past that what these people know about India and its diversity. When one discuss about any weak vein of religion, most of the people does not accepted it and when they are receiving a criticism from a person who is a foreigner or living abroad, it is not tolerated by the people who talk about intolerance. Despite of all these hurdles, Baldwin put her perception openly and gave an equal opportunity to her characters to flow according to their own way without exaggerating anything. When asked about the religious diversities in her novels, she answered in an interview-

“It was important to me to write as a Hindu and as a Christian.”

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