

Feminine search for identity in Shauna Singh Baldwin's Novel *What the Body Remembers*

Satpal Singh

Assistant Professor (English) BUC College Batala, India

Email: Satpalpadda@gmail.com

Abstract— *Female in the contemporary era in a way projects an image which totally rejects the traditional image of the same gender. Female has faced many problems in the phallogocentric society since ages now the things look totally changed but the current position of the woman is still not fully liberated from these problems related to the identity. The main focus of the paper is on the issues like women's quest for her identity, her struggle to achieve a stable position in a male dominated society while fighting with the age-old conventions. This paper explores a new insight for a woman to fight against oppression, inequality and gender discrimination because these are the dangerous social evils for the notion of equality and social justice.*

Keywords— *Search for Identity, Oppression, Honour-Killing, Male Hegemony.*

Postcolonialism as an intellectual discourse is inextricably linked to the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism. The term 'Postcolonialism' brings forward the freedom and political emancipation of the colonized from the colonizers and explores the cultural activities used by the imperial powers to overpower the body and mind of the colonized people. It is the colonial mind that has suppressed over the years their voice as inferior. The term has a connection with imperialism and exploitation of the marginalized so as to impose their dominant cultural hegemony and to make the colonized people feeble and voiceless.

As a result of the politics of colonization, the natives were not only exploited economically, politically and culturally, but also psychologically. In this connection, Edward Said in *Orientalism* (27) states that in the eyes of colonial masters of the West, the East is nothing but a place of ignorance. This attitude reveals that the superiority of the West suppresses the ability of the people of the East. He argues that the idea of the orient has been a powerful construct and the non-west has been viewed as 'the other' of the West. In colonial world this construct inspires the colonialists and Postcolonialism makes an attempt to study the significance of the processes that lead to the formation of 'the other'. Frantz Fanon, the earliest postcolonial theorist, expresses in *The*

Wretched of the Earth (1961) that "colonialism is a source of destruction and trauma for colonized peoples who are taught to look negatively upon their people, their culture and themselves" (227). In postcolonial literature, identity politics raises an important issue in that the anti-conquest narrative analyses its social and cultural perspectives of the marginalized people. These social and cultural perspectives of the marginalized deal with the creative resistance to the culture of the colonizer and difficulties of establishment of the colonial society because of cultural resistance; how the colonizers developed their postcolonial identity; and how neo-colonialism employs the social relation to view the non-western world as inhabited by others.

The question of identity constitutes another major subject of postcolonial literature that pinpoints the way the colonized people identify themselves and also how the postcolonial authors claim to represent that identity. A search for identity is an integral part of post-colonial writings which represent the experience of colonialism and the challenge of the post-colonial world.

If we trace the post-colonial literature with a view of tracing the major themes that have inspired it, undoubtedly "Search for identity" would certainly be one of them. Indeed, it is a universal theme which started as early as the Greek civilization came into existence. Socrates, an Athenian moral philosopher, first of all used this theme in his philosophical works. From Greek playwright Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* to African American writer Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), the search for identity has shown its power as one of the main thematic concerns in literature. It seems to have a peculiar attraction for the post-colonial writers and Shauna Singh Baldwin was no exception.

An analysis of postcolonial discourse reveals that it shares many similarities with Feminist approach. The two fields are associative, complementary to each other. Firstly, both discourses are predominantly political in nature and struggle against oppression and injustice. Moreover, both reject the established hierarchical, patriarchal system, which is dominated by the white male hegemony, and deny the supremacy of masculine power and authority. Imperialism like patriarchy is also a

phallogocentric, supremacist ideology that subjugates and dominates its subjects. The oppressed woman is in this sense is very similar to the colonized subject (Ashcroft, et al., *Post-Colonial Studies* 101).

Feminism is a very common term in the modern society which acts like the movements started for re-defining, making, and defending equal political, economic, and social right and equal opportunities for women. Feminism is both a political stance and a theory that focuses on gender as a subject of analysis when reading cultural practices and a platform to demand equality, rights and justice. Feminism's key assumption is that gender roles are predetermined and the woman is socially trained to perform these roles. This implies that roles like 'daughter or mother' are not naturally constructed but socially. Feminism is stance, a political position while feminist theory is the philosophical position to read cultural practices like art or literature.

Essentially, exponents of post-colonialism react against colonialism in the political and economic sense while feminist theorists reject colonialism of a sexual nature. Further, the theoretical trajectories of Postcolonialism and Feminism converge on the concept of double-colonization, first expounded in the mid-1980s by Kristen Holst-Petersen and Anna Rutherford in their *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Postcolonial Women's Writing* (1986). The concept draws on the observation that women are subjected to both the colonial domination of empire and the male domination of patriarchy. In this respect empire and patriarchy both are similar to each other and both exercise control over female colonial subjects, who are, thus, doubly colonized by imperial/patriarchal power.

In recent times, postcolonial studies has reacted to this viewpoint and subsequently involved itself with the issue of gender, questioning to what extent this affects the lives of colonial subjects who also happen to be female. In her celebrated essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's critical investigation of "Sati Pratha" the self-immolation of women on the funeral of deceased husbands in India, reveals women's predicament of being silenced between the double-oppression of patriarchy and imperialism. In this essay Spivak writes:

If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow (Spivak, 82-83)

The fact that colonial oppression affected men and women in different ways should be recognized, as females were often subjected to double colonization, because they were not only oppressed for their position as colonized people but also as women.

As a feminist writer, Shauna Singh aims to explore woman's inner psyche, their inner or outer conflicts, and search for identity, identity of womanhood, national identity, cultural identity area and religious identity. Her novel *What the Body Remembers* deals with the conflict between self and society and conflict between individual awareness and national consciousness.

The theme of women's Quest for self-identity forms the crux of this novel. Her feminism is an integral part of her critical approach. This close coherence is reflected both by the intersexual and metafictional complexity of her narrative and individual view point she adopts in her critical prose. Both as writer and critic Baldwin has time and again stood up as an advocate of women's right, taken up current issues of emancipation, and exposed the dangerous deficits of established patriarchal hierarchies.

One must note the fact that the problems of immigrant women presented by Baldwin are based on her personal experiences and thus are more close to the reality. The identity of women is a central issue of discussion in the feminist criticism. The identity for Diasporic women perpetuates through the complexity of combined plurality in the singular self. They try to explore the roots in out-of-reach native land which dominates their memories. On one hand women have to gain their separate identity in the male dominated culture by breaking its norms and conventions and on the other hand they try to maintain their cultural identity by retaining the cultural patterns.

Roop, the protagonist of the selected novel, experiences emotional pain when she marries Sardar ji and is forced to leave her home and family. Ripped from the proverbial womb, when she arrives at her husband's home, she is told, "Time will heal you." Years later, Roop realizes what these words actually mean:

When women like Toshi says time will heal, they mean that time will heal not so the wound bleeds any less, but so the bleeding becomes my habitual companion, and only if it stops one day will I notice its absence. (Baldwin, 213)

This is a complete surrender of her individual identity and she feels in this new environment, a place and situation in which she physically does not belong. The idea of body memory is used in the presentation of religion. In many ways, the hidden tension between the different religious groups in Punjab. Baldwin depicts the social position of Indian women at the time of the novel. By following the experiences of Satya and Roop, Baldwin gives the reader a picture of a pattern of life that had been followed for centuries. Women in India were given few options. Their purpose in life was to marry and bear children, and they spent their lives dependent on fathers or husbands for financial support. This tradition is especially noticeable in Roop's life. She begins life as a bold, adventurous child. As a young girl she has a variety

of adventures and misadventures, including wandering off on her own. However, by the time Roop has reached marriageable age, she has been moulded into the ideal Sikh woman. By the age of sixteen, she has learned to be a "good-good, sweet-sweet girl" (Baldwin, 75), always "listening and obeying" (Baldwin, 75).

The experiences of other women throughout the novel also follow this pattern. Gujri, Roop's family's servant, was given to Roop's mother as a wedding present, "like Mama's dowry pots and pans" (Baldwin, 21). Gujri had no choice in the matter. At the age of seven her father gave her away into virtual slavery. At that young age she had already been married and widowed, and because of this misfortune "her whole village thought her unlucky," and that she could never marry again "lest she kill another husband" (Baldwin, 21). As a result of this combination of chauvinism and superstition, Gujri is reduced to being a permanent domestic slave. Kusum, Roop's sister-in-law, has a much more tragic end. When mob violence by the Muslim majority on the eve of Partition threatens to overrun Bachan Singh's home, he kills Kusum himself:

"I cannot endure even the possibility that some Muslim might put his hands upon her . . . I must do my duty" (Baldwin, 455).

Roop ruminates over her father's action: "Papa ji thinks that for good-good women, death should be preferable to dishonour" (Baldwin, 456).

This episode illustrates most dramatically that a woman's value in this society is irrevocably tied to her worth as a wife and mother, and to her honour as a pure woman, a "good-good, sweet-sweet." Her life, once that value has been removed, is not worth living. So each female character in this novel is in the search of her real identity but in fact these characters are the mouthpiece of Baldwin and through them Baldwin projects her own quest for identity.

Financial factor also decides one's identity. Most of the times, our identity depends exclusively on our economic conditions. Though there was adverse family background especially on financial level, yet Roop was very positive and optimistic, that she will be married to a rich man. And showing this confidence she says to her father:

My kismet is still good, don't worry, Papa ji Jyotish Sunder Chand said I have good kismet. Didn't he say I will marry a rich man? (Baldwin, 19)

It means she is in search of a new identity, a new sound financial status. Bachan Singh was in no haste for Roop's marriage, as she was very young at that time. At the same time unexpectedly Sardar Kushal Singh comes to Bachan Singh's house with a marriage proposal of Roop for 43 year old Sardar ji, his brother in law. Bachan Singh finds this proposal an unmatched proposal, but his gratefulness

towards Kushal Singh however, doesn't allow him to say no to the proposal. Bachan Singh was totally bewildered on the proposal and remained silent. On this state, Roop herself came forward to break her father's silence and gave her consent to this polygamous proposal as she wanted to acquire a new identity in the society. She says, "Papaji, you can tell Sardar Kushal Singh I say yes." (Baldwin, 111). Roop feels happy that after marriage she will have servants. Roop says, "will I have servants?" (Baldwin, 111). It was for the very first time that Bachansingh could realize his daughter's sensible nature. She looks very wise in accepting this proposal, at the same time she was keen to marry Sardar ji because he was rich and a socially respected person. To her marriage was a passport and freedom from endless restrictions and confines, something that would, 'open the world a little wider' and her prolonged dream of being a rich man's wife also tempts her for this decision. On the other hand, she knew about the economic limitations of her. Being deaf on one side of the ear was also one of her hidden weakness. Baldwin says beautifully about status of Roop as:

Roop should appreciate her good fortune. She has been married despite Papa ji misfortunes, despite having no mother to arrange her marriage, despite being born under the very strong influence of the Mangal Star, despite having one bad ear. (Baldwin, 164)

Women are always considered inferior, submissive and weaker sex, they face more serious problems in migration than the migrant men. These immigrant women are more close to the cultural, moral and religious values at their motherland; this makes it more difficult for them to adjust with the new country. The Diasporic literature is the best and authentic way to explore the problems of women in migration. Indian Writings in English is, in a way, a product of the cultural clash with the Westerns and the clash is presented in the Indian English novel from its beginning. While evoking the colonial legacies in the contemporary society with the similar theme of cultural clash, the contemporary Diasporic Indian English writers impress and attract the readers around the globe. A number of women writers of Indian Diaspora portray immigrant women's problems in the crosscultural encounters. The women writers of Indian Diaspora illustrate the problems of migrants and reveal their relationship with the homeland and the host land.

This study presents a systematic analysis of the fictional world of Shauna Singh Baldwin with a view to focus on the identity of women, which they are destined to face while struggling against violence, frustration, despair, and quest for survival and identity. Their quest of survival

and identity becomes intense once it is contrasted with the elevated human values for which they live. In all her novels and short stories Baldwin has taken up the major theme of search for identity. Her works speak volume of her best imagination, literary sophistication and mystery over the devices of novel writing. As a woman writer she has focused even on the minute incidents in women's life, their inner psyche and their suffering which often ends without or sometimes with an open revolt. She tries to depict the problem of contemporary women with a view to find the strategies to solve them. In her novels there is a direct correlation with the surroundings, whatever she sees is reflected in her works.

REFERENCES

The Primary Sources:

- [1] Baldwin, Shauna Singh. *What The Body Remembers*. New York: AnchorBooks, 2001. Print.

The Secondary Sources:

- [2] Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, Eds. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989. Print.
- [3] ---. *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- [4] ---. *Post Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print
- [5] Barry Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999. print.
- [6] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Pluto, 1986. Print.
- [7] ---, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1967. Print.
- [8] Guha, Ranajit, and Gayatri C. Spivak, eds. *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.
- [9] Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1993. print.
- [10] ---, *Orientalism*. 1978. London: Penguin, 1995. print.