

Loss of Cultural Symbols during Migration in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *Montreal 1962*

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Abstract— *The present paper aims at identifying the problems related to identity that emerge due to the cross-cultural immigration of people especially the women of different generation and in different countries. The short story Montreal 1962 is an excursion into the lives of two Indians in a foreign land and their attempt to establish identity in the face of a competing and hostile alien culture. The loss of cultural symbols is visible at different levels in the story which in return brings forth a clash between the two different cultures. This kind of tension or clash between migrants and natives is a universal phenomenon in the era of migration.*

Keywords—Cultural clash, Sikh, Turban.

A nation's cultural memory carries its wars, victories, defeats, martyrdoms and symbols. That is, the identity of a community or a religious group hinges on access to its past. No religious group or nation comes into existence without a discourse of belonging. This discourse includes myths, stories, shared icons and cultural symbols from where a social group takes its identity. These signs and symbols empower them with a sense of being united under a unified identity. Let's take the example of Sikh religion, a Sikh can be recognized in any country just from his turban and full grown beard and even a Muslim can be traced from his cultural symbols.

In the era of immigration people live in the scattered forms all over the world but these icons and cultural symbols bring them together, bring them into contact, at least symbolically, with other people in the different places. This collective sharing of icons and symbols generates the emotional connection essential to form a coherent identity.

Identity is a symbolic matter—a meaning attached to a person, or which he is able to attach to himself, with the help of responses of others. Disturb these responses, disturb these meanings, and you disturb the man. A society fails to supply adequate identity when symbols are disturbed to the extent that they no longer give reliable reference points (in such things as status symbols, place symbols, style models, cultic mystiques) by which people

can locate themselves socially, realise themselves emotionally, and declare (to self and others) who they are. The search for identity has been not only tedious but wrong-headed, because it has never been clearly established what sort of 'identity' could be expected in a bilingual, multi-cultural, pluralistic society. The question of identity in modern society has broadly been approached at three levels involving the dimensions of national identity, regional identity and individual or personal identity. Quite often these dimensions convey different meanings to different people, for some it is simply a deep sense of loyalty to, or pride in, one's native land, whereas for other it takes the form of a well articulated political philosophy, encompassing the overriding goals of the policies of the nation-state.

Well-known contemporary political theorist of nationalism, national and ethnic diversity, Montserrat Guibernau argues

“National identity is currently one of the most powerful forms of collective identity. National identity is based upon the sentiment of belonging to a specific nation, endowed with its own symbols, traditions, sacred places, ceremonies, heroes, history, culture and territory”.(Catalan Nationalism 152).

She asserts that a common national identity favours the creation of solidarity bonds among the members of a given community and allows them to imagine the community they belong to as separate and distinct from others. These others can be people belonging to other nation-states or minority ethnic, religious or linguistic communities within the same nation-state. At the same time, the individuals who enter a culture emotionally charge certain symbols, values, beliefs and customs by internalizing them and conceiving them as part of themselves while rejecting others as alien and enemy attributes. In this sense the identities “act as mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion, creating imaginary limits between those who belong and those who do not belong to specific communities” (Catalan Nationalism 3).

In *Montreal 1962*, an immigrant woman and her husband come to Canada in search of a sound financial identity. They are lured by the officials of the Canadian embassy in India who had praised them as

“You’re a well-qualified man. We need professional people.” And they talked about freedom and opportunity for those lucky enough to already speak English....exotic new Canadians, new blood to build a new country. (Baldwin, *English Lessons 16*).

The identity of women is a central issue of discussion in the feministic 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.

The story presents the predicament of a sikh wife living with her husband in Canada where her husband is asked to take off his turban and cut his hair short to have the job. These turbans carry so much cultural and religious affiliation and affection in the life of a Sikh. Here turban is a symbol of strong religious identity, loss of turban means loss of identity: “They said I could have the job if I take off my turban and cut my hair short” (Baldwin, *English Lessons 17*)

Even his counterpart is more concerned with his identity than her own because in India a woman is considered to be the part of her husband’s identity. She has never seen her father, her brother and her husband without a turban. But, these turbans appear to be bed-sheets or curtains to the Canadian dry-cleaner woman without eyebrows. The Canadians in a way try to force her husband to sacrifice his cultural identity and tradition to adopt the new world: “*You must be reborn white-skinned – and clean-shaven to show it – to survive.*” (Baldwin, *English Lessons 15*)

If the cultural symbols (sari, turban etc) are being challenged by the society it means loss of individuality and identity and also a sense of loss of belongingness. This situation is often faced by immigrants and is a common phenomenon. This is very clear from the conversation with the neighbourhood dry cleaner and the protagonist who brought a wedding sari for dry cleaning:

---she asked me , “Is it a bed sheet?”

“No,” I said.

“Curtains?”

“No.” (Baldwin, *English Lessons 16*)

The detailed description of the process of washing, drying, folding and wearing the turbans focuses on the

love and attachment of a sikh woman towards turban. Turban possesses a strong cultural importance for the Sikh community. For the protagonist the red colour of a turban stands for the blood of the Sikh gurus and martyrs:

I unfurled the gauzy scarlet on our bed and it seemed as though I’d poured a pool of the sainted blood of all the Sikh martyrs there. (Baldwin, *English Lessons 17*)

Tying of turban by woman protagonist reminds her of the cultural heritage of her sikh community:

In the mirror I saw my father as he must have looked as a boy, my teenage brother as I remember him, you as you face Canada, myself as I need to be. (Baldwin, *English Lessons 18*)

She tries to protect her husband’s traditional and cultural identity before the Canadians who do not know its importance. She declares:

And so, my love, I will not let you cut your strong rope of hair and go without a turban into this land of strangers. The knot my father tied between my chunni and your turban is still strong between us, and it shall not fail you now. My hands will tie a turban every day upon your head and work so we can keep it there. One day our children will say, “My father came to this country with very little but his turban and my mother learned to work because no one would hire him.” (Baldwin, *English Lessons 18*)

She finds it difficult to accept Canada as home and adapt to life there. From this comes up the issue of identity in a big way not merely of the fictional characters, but also that of their creators. The diasporic writers’ identity is constantly questioned. Shauna Singh was born in 1962 to Sikh refugee parents (from what is now in Pakistan) and then her parents went to Canada. Her parents then moved to India in the 1960s. “My father moved to India because it was not much fun being a Sikh in Canada in the 1960s,” Baldwin says, “So he went back thinking that was the place where he could wear his turban ...” (qtd. in Methot). In the story Baldwin try to reveal the loss of identity which a Sikh couple experience in Canada while compromising with the native culture. The protagonist of the story beautifully remarks in this regard: No one said then, “*You must be reborn white-skinned – and clean-shaven to show it – to survive.*” (Baldwin, *English Lessons 18*)

Shauna Singh Baldwin’s short story *Montreal 1962* seems to present a world of binary oppositions where East

meets West, the confrontation of cultures is problematic and the well-defined identities cannot be reconciled. Clash between western identity and eastern identity can be clearly seen in the following words:

One day our children will say ‘my father came to this country with very little but his turban and my mother learned to work because no one would hire him.’ Then we will have taught Canadians what it takes to wear a turban. (Baldwin, *English Lessons* 16)

In the contemporary age the people are migrating out of their motherland in search of better opportunities. Migration causes various problems in the life of migrating people. In the global-village world, it is the need of time to acquaint the new generation with the problems emerging in the cross-cultural migration. To the immigrant women, the burden of the cultural, moral and religious values at their motherland makes it more difficult to adjust with the new country. The Diasporic literature is the best and authentic tool to discuss the problems of women in migration. Indian Writing in English is, in a way, a product of the cultural clash with the Westerns and the clash is presented in the Indian English novels and short stories from its beginning. A number of women writers of Indian Diaspora portray immigrant women’s problems in the cross-cultural encounters and reveal their relationship with the homeland and the host land. The women writers’ perspective to the problems of migrants is either unique or akin to one another. The immigrant women suffer from the sense of dislocation in the host country. When they migrate out of the stability of their original culture, they feel dislocated in the alien one because of their differences and the views of the natives to look at them. The geographical, social, political, legal and cultural setup of the host country, which does not match with her own motherland, leads her to feel dislocated among the foreigners.

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