

CULTURE, TIME AND SPACE: REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN SELECT STORIES OF SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S ENGLISH LESSONS AND OTHER STORIES

Dr Priyanka Singh

Abstract

Culture is said to determine the role and identity of an individual which in turn determines the way the social life of an individual is structured. At the centre of this are his hopes, aspirations, desires and experiences that determine his individual identity. Thus the push-pull of identity is experienced by individuals who constitute the very society that they make. In the complex flux of identity formation are also added the national objectives and global demands that further determine how an individual is received, treated and represented at different platforms. When it comes to women, identity and its formulation naturally rests on her body. Her body is seen as a representation of power, of honour, of conformity and of tradition. However, it is how her individual identity interacts with the demands of the local, national and the global level determines whether they become conformists or active agents of change. Since literary texts have been long used to give identity a form and represent the ideas of the social world, the same medium has been used to provide her space and engage in efforts to restore the agency to women, to alter conventional images and favourably put emphasis on woman's sense of self worth. Education, social interaction, economic independence supplemented with the political movement for equality of the sexes has unquestionably altered the image of women over time. They have become human beings who are capable of thinking and raising doubts and making their existence reasonable and exhibit their ability to transform their own sense of self and therefore, of the community. The paper seeks to present how women have represented to curate culture and develop courage and character in course of their adjustment to change across time and space while also asserting their identity while confronting fear of freedom and of the 'other' with reference to select passionate stories from Shauna Singh Baldwin's English Lessons and Other Stories.

Keywords: Identity, culture, ideology, affirmation.

J
H
E
R
S
O

**CULTURE, TIME AND SPACE: REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN
IN SELECT STORIES OF SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S
ENGLISH LESSONS AND OTHER STORIES**

Dr. Priyanka Singh

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing. (Arundhati Roy)

These lines by the author and activist Arundhati Roy, whatever the original purpose is, instil a hope that the future beholds, a hope that one can envision and head towards. The question, however, arises is how this future can be envisioned for it would require a form, a representation to give meaning to actions involved in achieving the objectives aspired. Unquestionably, man has the natural instinct to give a form to his perception and it can comfortably be said that representation has always been central to all art forms. Aristotle too defined all arts—verbal, visual and musical, as modes of representation:

“from childhood men have an instinct for representation. & he is far more imitative and learns his first lessons by representing things” (Poetics 1448b)

Therefore, “things don't mean: we construct meaning under representation systems—concepts and signs” (Representation 25). Representation as a concept when traced to Aristotle's Poetics is described as signs and objects that stand for something else. Capable as human beings are, they create and manipulate signs thereby labelling representation as a construct and an invention. Aristotle perceived representation as an invention, a construction and a creation, which is a part and parcel of the culture and society that produces it. Therefore, at one level representation is the replica of its subject—an artistic outlook; at another level it stands as a part of the whole—a political theory. Since it is culture and society that feeds representation, they should not be seen as a separate. It would be interesting to note how it operates within a cultural context and give answer to why such representation is important. Extending this notion to culture and society, representation determines who one is and who has agency. In this context, it is taken to fixing and framing identities within a social set up. Whatever is perceived depends on

J
H
E
R
S
O

how it is described. This description is representation and is often articulated through language—of words, of music, of signs. The world makes sense and becomes meaningful once given an image and literature can be assumed as an “ideological apparatus.” Using language gives ideology a framework and form thus affecting the way ideology operates, works and results. Amidst this understanding of representation it would be rewarding to see how women are represented within the frame of cultural ideology that seeks to maintain the status quo. Are women represented merely as deprived of agency, as helpless and as silenced or as entities with agency attempting self exploration are some question explored in this paper with reference to select stories from Shauna Singh Baldwin’s *English Lessons and Other Stories*.

One can vividly locate representation of women capable of thinking, understanding and responding to situations thereby registering themselves as conscious beings with existence that is valuable. Patricia Stubbs, establishing the relation between images of women and literature, opines: “It is through literature and particularly through the novel, that the dominant images of women and their experiences. . . have been most easily and. . . most widely celebrated” (IX). In simple words, literature has been able to reflect and create images that expand the consciousness of what women perceive about themselves, thus, combating partial/half represented female experience. A characteristic feature of Baldwin’s collection of stories is that she has women representing all ages as a central character of her stories to paint the entire gamut of women experience and understanding their psyche.

Education and economic independence are important elements linked to the political movement for equality of the sexes and acts as a catalyst to provide breathing space and transform traditional roles prescribed for women and transforming attitudes and values. While women may be encouraged to restrict themselves to tapered roles of housewife and mothering and reject education, thinkers like Friedan propose “a new life plan for women” (274) that is stimulated by education and career so that they could prosper and give meaning to their life. The question of education is extremely important for women because without it, observe Mumtaz and Shaheed, “they are lost” and “have neither the knowledge nor the tools with which to fight for their rights” (12). Education of women, therefore, is a key to their liberation from the biases and atrocities they are subjected to at all times and all places. Education tends to extend the horizons of woman who rejects uncalled-for docility and explore opportunities beyond the confines of home and family are often labeled as feminists. Therefore, contrastingly education, when at par with men, is often seen as an unfavorable asset for women. For the women narrator in Baldwin’s, *The Cat Who Cried*, her education in America is seen suspiciously and supplemented with ill intent of mataji, her mother-in-law, who believes that her daughter-in-law’s parents, by sending her to study in America had tendency towards wasting money, and made it clear

J
H
E
R
S
O

that she “was not to be trusted with money” (137). Mataji stands to maintain and account for the dominant image of docility, a cultural construction, from her daughter-in-law, while the latter stands for intellectual discourse, decision making, strength and struggle. As women receive education they experience an increasing urge to voice their feelings and express their desires, both of which mataji was trying to strangle by luring her son with ancestral property and forcing to return to India.

By allowing the women narrator in *The Cat Who Cried* economic independence, the author has essentially given her character an opportunity to empower herself and to take control of her life. Empowerment of women through economic independence has been elucidated by Lata Chhatre as:

Empowerment means woman's realization of her own capacities and power so that she can face challenges and overcome social and cultural barriers. It builds a positive image about herself. It creates enough confidence in her so that she takes an active part in decision making related to herself and her family. (123)

The narrator's economic independence provides her a hope that she would have the liberty to take decisions for herself and her children which was being denied to her otherwise. She silenced her 'daring' for long, a characteristic that her mother had consciously imbibed in her telling her that it was an excellent instrument and she therefore had therefore worn a 'mask-face', and looked forward to receive a paycheque with her name on it. The mask-face that she had worn all these years to suggest that she had not changed, does finally come off because, as the narrator herself claims, “there are limits to silence” (141). When her husband, Prem, closes all doors of opportunities, fails to give her space or listen to her and controls her earned money by cleverly putting it in the into the savings account meant to finance their return to India, the narrator finally tells him, “Well, then, go back to India alone” (142). She finally claims to be the cat who cried, an ill omen bringing bad luck and that needs to be cured with puja and hymns of gods. The narrator had learnt to use silence well and convert it as a symbol of strength than docility and redefines what it means to be a woman.

A similar hope of financial independence is hoped by Kanwaljeet in Baldwin's other story, *English Lessons*. Once in America, Kanwaljeet learns to find her own ways. She learns of the dark realities of life while she waits for two years to come to America to her husband and then while she awaits her green card. Her contemplation of her “worm existence”, “unacknowledged wifhood”, her being called her husband's girlfriend and her son his bastard are indicative of persistence that she will not give up in any situation. She starts English lessons which she feels shall allow her financial independence. Her husband too allows for the same as she may “get a good-paying job at Dunkin' Donuts or maybe the

J
H
E
R
S
O

Holiday Inn” (133) and is quick to tell the home tutor that Kanwaljeet must not be taught too many American ideas. But Kanwaljeet has already decided for herself: “Tomorrow, I will ask her where I can learn how to drive” (133). Similarly, Devika aka Asha in the story Devika takes the reader through the complicated textures of the lives of South Asian women in their absurdities and painful truth. Though Asha, “wilful, fun-loving, irreverent Asha” (160) had masked herself as Devika- a perfect wife, she could not be cocooned into the role for long. She finally succeeds in unveiling the mask that she had worn as Devika due to the pressure of society and culture and tells her husband in affirmation: “I am Asha. . . Devika was afraid of living here, so she just. . . flew away” . . . “When I feel better...I want ... to go to Niagra Falls...” (180). She becomes Asha, a hope of that Self, of what she desires to be. When one becomes aware of oneself, one affirms ones existence, ones identity.

Women have always been seen in association with culture as its progenitor, establisher and maintainer. The biggest loss and pain that one could inflict on the other was by corrupting one's culture by humiliating one's women. The observation of Indra Mahindra fits well in this regard when she states, “. . . the easiest and the most effective way of taking a revenge on another man was to defile his wife or rape his daughters” (25). The patriarchal culture in which men control the social institutions and women's bodies and violence is a natural product and woman's body are sites where the act of vengeance could be enacted, dismantle their honour or where national politics could be played. Baldwin puts forth a testament for women who suffered at the hands of men and society when she writes about Chandini Kaur in the story Family Ties who remains buried in an attaché of her brother who had declined to accept her for she had a faint heart and had failed to save the family honour. She lends a voice to the voiceless women who were caught, raped and converted during partition and represents the unrepresented in society. Under no circumstance can a woman afford to be defeated of her virtue. So in likelihood of danger, in order to protect their (men's) honour, women, especially girls, are forced to end their life by consuming poison, jumping into the well or set their bodies on fire. Such actions become a general guideline in case of apparent danger of sexual assault and in this line we see Inder, a little boy, being conditioned by his father not to hesitate to use the gun on his sister, the little kukri, for she too was faint hearted and was becoming like his own sister, Chandini Kaur, since “a faint heart can bring dishonor to those who love you” (17). He instructs Inder: “If the Muslim come and your sister is in danger, you must shoot her rather than let her fall into their hand” (18). The socio-cultural bigotry—a man-created menace—deprives love of its passion, charm and force as one discovers that honour of man is primary above all and needs to be maintained at the cost of woman's body. In the story, Family Ties, that captures the awareness and knowledge that the little girl who realizes that for man, represented by her father, honour is principal and that it is

J
H
E
R
S
O

associated with woman's body and that fear needs to be dealt with for there is no escape as greater fear comes from the known and disguised in love as Baldwin mentions at another place in her story Jassie: "The kind of violence one should fear is always quiet and comes all wrapped up in words like Love until you live with it daily and you value only that which is valuable to the violator" (154).

The idea of ownership that the society affects on women's mind and body is reflected through the character Jassie in the story Jassie. Owning has its varied forms and stamping the owned is an expression of it. Such a marking not only denies individuality of the person who is possessed but also limits the prospects of liberation. Baldwin submits a similar loss of identity of women in their association with men when she presents the naming tradition in Jassie where Jassie recalls how women assumed new names after their marriage. Though an uncommon phenomena in the urbanized global scenario one can still witness occasional instances of such conventions that have been suggestive of ownership of woman's body and her womb. Jassie recalls how she chooses to keep the maiden names of her two mothers on her school form rather than the new names given by her father's family after marriage. She defies the tradition by writing her 'birth' mother's maiden name on her school form and later feels angered over the fact that her elder mother's maiden name could not be written for she was "married too young to remember it" (153) and unlike her other mother, it wasn't tattooed on her arm or elsewhere that she could find out. Naming not only relates to ownership of women by husband but also by the clan or the group to which an association is sought and any digression is not really welcome. When Jassie names her daughter Yasmine, an apparently Muslim name, in memory of her first love Feroze, her Sikh family blushed and "ever after called her Minni"(155).

Baldwin also traces the fact that individuals are masked and layered personalities and that their experiences and exposure contribute to it. The mask, owing to customs, traditions and beliefs, that the society puts on Jassie rob her of the warmth that she claims to have left in India, in the ballroom dancing with Feroze and earned pain and coldness to be carried through her life. A similar mask is worn by the narrator of *The Cat Who Cried* to assure friends on visits to India that she had not changed "as if change were some terrible catastrophe that had so far been deftly averted" (142). Religion, geography, language, all create multiplicity of experience and personalities. Jassie struggles to be called Jassie instead of Jessie, to invoke God through "her prayers" and not "Christian prayers" that she learnt in her convent school and now played in the hospital where she is admitted and to speak her language Punjabi and not English. Jassie, however realizes that her struggle weren't appropriate as women are taught so to tame their thoughts and desires, and begins to read out from the rosary for Elsie. Strange though, She has an untamed mind and wonders if she could have "learned the namaaz as easily as the

J
H
E
R
S
O

rosary?" (157). These issues, that one may relate to Diaspora are not essentially so since these existed while Jassie was in her country amongst her own people. Rather, one comes to realize that a woman lives a Diasporic existence, wherever she may be- her own land or foreign.

The ability to comfort others and reaffirmation of human values has been the strength of women and it is a force that brings them together. Through Amma's character in *A Pair of Ears*, Baldwin demonstrates how women can be a support and sooth the pain inflicted by own people as they stand united opposite to the male world that appear a threat to women. Amma displays her capacity to embrace her Me-saab, who is mistreated by her son and does her every little bit to provide happiness and comfort. The ailing and aged Mem-saab refuses to be reduced to a victimized being and live comfortably in Jagadhri on her 'Streedhan', she meets lawyers to defend her property from her own son. Her will, under all probability, is likely to melt into the universal and give strength to women so that they can determine their desires and decisions as relevant. Amma is Mem-saab's true companion. She is her ears when they are out on the street and also within the house. She keeps her ears to be informed and inform her Mem-saab of what is going on in her house. Amma knows Balwir has come with the intension to take hold of the property and is smuggling things out of the house and bribing the Khansaama. True to her salt, Amma tries to correct the Khansaama taunting him that only "a fool would accept dirty money" (76) and later declares: " "No." I will not give away any more of Mem-saab's food. Nothing sweet, and no more of her salt than I can help, till I know the price of Khansaama's heart" (77). It is Amma, Mem-saab's borrowed ears, that understood her pain, suffering and claims that "there is always the revenge of the powerless" (93) and cuts the wrist of the already dead Mem-saab, fills it in a glass and spills in the drawing room such that her son and family could find everything soiled and cursed. She writes with blood on the floor: "Welcome to this house and may you be happy" (94). Her association with Mem-saab had definitely taught Amma a lesson who decides to go to her daughter's place and not to her son who lived nearby, for he had only been interested in the money that she could give to him. Baldwin's attempt to bring these two women together reminds of Todd's opinion that cultivation of woman-woman relationship is a symbiotic relationship which is mutually beneficial for better survival:

Social friendship is nurturing tie not pitting women against society but rather smoothing their passage within it... the support and acceptance of other women is essential, since... women aid and sustain each other. (Todd 4)

The quest for self entails overcoming of obstacles which old Mem-saab tries with Amma as a confidant by her side. Amma, to learns from the advice of her madam that her son, Shiv, wasn't reliable and was interested in her money only. Even when Mem-saab is

J
H
E
R
S
O

ditched by her own son and falls short of finances to support herself, she does not disown Amma. Rather she takes her responsibility and Amma too reciprocates in the same line.

While Baldwin tells stories of old women, young women-engaged, married, young girls in very basic relationships, she takes the reader through the confessional modes of thought and across time. Though very simple at the surface level, each story presents a distinct pattern of learning and transitions that women place themselves in. The Sardarni Sahib in the very first story Rawalpindi 1919 is a woman who cherishes patriarchal values. Unfailingly she serves Chaudhary Amir Singh chappati's made by her own hands. She is seen abiding by the cultural traditions without any umbrage. But when one chances to read her mind, one could easily sense her understanding of cultural nuances, collectivist values and the cosmopolitan scenario that she would soon have to face. She understands that her son Sarup, once in the West, shall take on individualistic values. She understands that she has to prepare herself to let him go and even more that she and her husband need to adjust according to the son's foreign tastes, needs and mannerism. Sardarni Sahib tells her husband: "You will need to buy chairs for this house when he returns," . . . "And we will need [white]plates" (3). As she observes the mannerisms of an Indian wife, at the same time, as a thoughtful woman she is indicating her husband to be prepared for change and that the usual steel plates have to be replaced with chinaware once their son returns from the west. She is aware that change is inevitable and one has to be prepared for it. Similarly, the woman in Montreal 1962 is strong, determined and hard working. In the foreign land she refuses to let go her culture and values to fit into the new place and job requirements. While she recalls the Canadian dream being shown to well qualified professionals, she stands strong and determined with her husband and not let him take off his turban and cut his hair. Rather she says: "My hands will tie a turban every day upon your head and work so we can keep it there" (8). Correspondingly, Dropadi Ma, the old servant in the story Draupadi Ma, commands the little girl narrator to get her gold bangle back which she had placed with the jewellery which Sukhimama's family was to the bride's family. But once she learns that Sukhmama was not willing for the marriage and she commands the girl: "Go. Bring my bangle back to me" (11). She does not wait to request the family give to the bangle but simply commands for it indicating that she is the owner and has the right to have it back. She goes on to bless Sukhimama offering him her own gold bangle. Her rebellion towards the adamant master of the house and her approval of whatever Sukhimama's decision shall be is obvious. It is possibly the strength that she transferred to Sukhimama that he takes a flight to Canada than being forcibly wedded. Dropadi Ma's "toothless smile was wide and joyous" (12).

The body is a medium by means of which a person dramatizes and enacts the possibilities of roles. Beauvoir recognizes that "to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards

J
H
E
R
S
O

the world” (39). The existence and point of view has, therefore, been different for men and women. Judith Butler articulates that “the sex dictates or necessitates certain social meanings for women's experience” (403). Such a formulation of the body helps understand the manner in which cultural conventions are embodied and enacted. But it is also clear that the body manifests one's identity as Beauvoir recognizes “the body being the instrument of our grasp on the world” and that “the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another” (65). Judith Butler expresses a similar opinion in the following lines:

the feminist impulse, and I am sure there is more than one, has often emerged in the recognition that my pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone, and that it delimits me in a shared cultural situation which in turn enables and empowers me in certain unanticipated ways. (406)

Education, awareness and economic independence are essential elements linked to the formation of attitudes and values of and towards women. Women in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *English Lessons and Other Stories* amidst change, of both time and place discover their real identity. Their awareness of the Self is the fundamental aspects that initiates their flight towards affirming their identity and locate space where their aspirations can be groomed and realised. Even while accounting for agency, voicing the desires, these women tend to think in terms of responsibility. The reason for such attitude is the conditioning under the patronship of patriarchy. Baldwin gives a realistic representation of women who cover the entire spectrum of docility and compliance to self willed and observant women with a willingness to judge and choose right. Her representation is authentic to the very existence of women, neither totally conformist nor radicals but a representation of power, of honour, of conformity and of tradition.

Works Cited :

Aristotle. Poetics 1448b. www.perseus.tufts.edu. n.a. Retrieved 20 July 2020. Web.

Baldwin, Shauna Singh. English Lessons and Other Stories. New Delhi: Rupa, 2009. Print.

Beauvoir, Simone de. The Second Sex. Trans. and Ed. H. M. PARshley. London: Vintage, 1997. Print.

Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: As Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." Theatre Journal 40.4 (1988): 519-531. Print.

Chhatre, Lata. "Empowerment of Women: The Buddhist Perspective." Feminism in Search of an Identity: The Indian Context. Ed. Meena Kelkar and Deepti Gangavane. New Delhi: Rawat, 2003. Print.

Hall, Stuart, ed. Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. London: Sage, 2003. Print.

Mahindra, Indra. The Rebellious Home-Makers. Bombay: SNDT Women's U, 1980. Print.

Mumtaz, Khawar, and Farida Shaheed, eds. Women of Pakistan: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back? London: Zed, 1987, Print.

Stubbs, Patricia. Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel (1880-1920). London: Harvester Press, 1979. Print.

Todd, Janet. Women's Friendship in Literature. New York: Columbia UP, 1980. Print.

J
H
E
R
S
O