

## The “Transgressive Other” in Shauna Singh’s “Devika”

**Madhuri Chawla**

Associate Professor  
Department of English  
Dyal Singh Evening College  
University of Delhi,  
Delhi, India.  
madhurichawla2000@yahoo.co.in

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### **Abstract**

Scholars often use the terms fragmentation, dual consciousness and hybridity to understand diaspora. The process of ‘dislocation’ and ‘relocation’ causes inner conflict as the diasporic populace is unable to completely adopt the ways of the host land and it clings tenaciously to the values and ethos of the homeland. The inner conflict leads to the rupture of the self and the creation of the fragmented self. Shauna in several of her narratives probes deep into the psyche of a plethora of immigrant women characters to unravel their travails in their land of adoption. The endeavor in this paper is to analyse her short story ‘Devika’, a woman centric narrative to understand the struggles of a displaced woman as she strives to come to terms with the novel experiences and emotions with their attendant anxieties and misgivings that she confronts in the land of adoption.

*Keywords:* dislocation; conflict; fragmentation; psyche; dual consciousness.

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Shauna Singh Baldwin was born in Canada but grew up in India and then again travelled across the ‘seven seas’ for higher studies. As such, she belongs to the privileged miniscule minority amongst women to have such an opportunity, yet Shauna shows a deep concern and awareness regarding the less privileged, oppressed and subjugated women. In her essay “In Search of Herstory,” Shauna states, “I immerse myself in historical novels . . . to remember what it was like before the arguments of feminists brought me this far . . . to be reminded how far so very few women have come on this planet..As a woman of 37 living in North America, I come to historical fiction as a beneficiary of first wave feminism”. But of the non-west she writes, “I am forever aware that women’s rights often do not even enter analyses or history books, and are first to be sacrificed.” (qtd. in Harveen Mann). It is perhaps for this reason that her narratives foreground women’s experiences. Also as a diasporic Sikh woman she was a minority in multiple ways. This fact too is reflected through her concern regarding identity, alienation, hybridity,

trauma, fragmentation, etc. in her works. Her very name is an act of transgression for she adopted the title “Singh”, usually given to a man instead of the usual title “Kaur” given to a Sikh woman. In an interview with Rosalia Scalia Shauna says, the word “Singh” means “lion” and is emblematic of “courage”, which perhaps she wanted to display both for herself and for other women and which she hoped would become a marker of her being. In doing so Shauna was negotiating social discrimination that comes with being born as what Beauvoir calls the “second sex”. She herself reveals that though named Shanaaz after birth, she hardly felt like a princess, given that her parents received multiple telegrams stating, “poor thing, you had a girl. Don’t worry, next time it will be a boy”. (qtd. in Methot) Relatives, while sending congratulatory messages to her parents, at her birth, also included a note of sympathy hoping that next time a son would be born.

At the same time the name is in addition an attempt at retaining a part of her roots, her native identity, since as a part of diaspora, marrying out of the community, amounted to almost completely losing her Punjabi identity. Scholars have variously highlighted that while the natives attempt at acculturation in the land of adoption they are nevertheless haunted by a sense of nostalgia centred on the idea of home. This “Home” as Morley says need not always be symbolised by any physical container or object; language and culture too provide the migrant with the ultimate mobile home (61). In case of Shauna her taking on the title of ‘Singh’ is symbolic of her connect with ‘Home’.

The idea of Home driven by the element of nostalgia dominates the psychology of the diasporic writers as they endeavour to come into their own in the new culture. Shauna Singh Baldwin is no exception. Her Collection of Short stories, *English Lessons and other Stories* is a gynocentric work which unfolds the lives of several first generation immigrant women in land of adoption. She probes into the inner recesses of a plethora of characters that she creates. The endeavor in this paper is to analyse her short story ‘Devika’, a narrative infused with women centric experiences to understand the travails of a displaced woman as she strives to come to terms with the novel experiences and emotions with their attendant anxieties and misgivings that she confronts in the land of adoption.

The fact that women have been oppressed socially, economically, and even ideologically has been highlighted by the feminist activists. Creative artists too raise their voice against the

subjugation of women as they underscore that women have been denied a status in society, as well as in literature and history. They examine the various images of women depicted in literature, be it ‘the angel in the house’ or ‘the devil in the flesh’. Critics like Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* critiqued the notion that a woman must seek her identity through her husband or children. Such false beliefs deluded women to lose their individual identities in that of their families. Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* emphasized the denial of basic human rights to women and their institutionalized repression in a patriarchal society. Patriarchal norms privilege men over women. Being a part of the Punjabi patriarchal society, a society which regards the birth of a girl as a misfortune and expresses sorrow, while the birth of a son is a joyous occasion, the norms conferring on him the status of being a permanent economic asset and protector of the family Shaun is alert to the marginalized status of women amongst the Punjabis. Her stories are a scathing comment on this gender bias. “I’m going back to feminism, as far as I’m concerned!” Singh Baldwin exclaims. “My religion says that women and men are equal. I’m going back to the Sikh faith and describing the difference between theory and current practice. The Sikh religion says I’m equal, so the men had better do something about their attitudes!”(Qtd.in Methot)

In Shauna’s story “Devika” Devika is the traditional “angel in the house”, who lives up to the image of the docile girl, because “Docile girls are good ... and good girls are docile” (*English Lessons* 162). Devika, like Chaya in another story “Nothing Must Spoil this Visit” from the same collection, reads others “to know what they expected. Then to do her best to satisfy, to choose as they would have her choose”, duty bound to love her husband Ratan’s family (162). Devika is apparently the stereotypical Indian woman who suffers oppression and suppression right from childhood and never voices her own desires. She is a mismatch of a, “convent-educated, homely girl” and this paradox in her situation is the crux of her schizophrenic personality. While she was in India, Devika, was the perfect angel, conditioned by the conformist attitude imposed upon her by “her mother, her father, and at least twenty solicitous relatives telling her what to do, how to do it, how to live, how to be good, how to be loved” (179).

Moving to Canada post marriage she admits “she found it more difficult to sort the good girls from the bad ones” and is further confused as she wonders what her father would say if he knew that Vandana di “made her husband help with the children and the dishes. Or that Kavali Di’s daughter worked as a model for a lingerie catalogue.”(163). Being dependent on the advice of the elders, their approach and guidance she finds herself at a loss in the new found freedom away from them all in Canada. Far removed from the influence of the pressures of homeland her

natural instincts push forth at the time of decision making. The movement abroad thus provides an opportunity for her inner self to surface. It leads to the conflict within, a tussle between her own desires and the expectations of the Punjabi community; the patriarchal pressure to conform and the desire of the inner being for individuality and expression. The result is the arrival of Asha, a creation of her mind. Devika the 'good wife' finishes off all the cooking, clears up the kitchen and then dresses herself up to receive her husband in the evening, not forgetting to insert the cassette of his favourite singer in the stereo system, suppresses her own wishes, has no choice or opinion of her own and when pushed makes the politically correct choice 'to show respect' for she feels /believes she is 'being tested' and is constantly under pressure to prove herself worthy and of living up to the image of the 'good girl' etc.

"Asha on the other hand wanted things Devika had never wanted. Asha wanted to take driving lessons. Asha wanted to visit Niagara Falls. Asha wanted to take flying lessons at Brampton Airport instead of going and visiting Vandana Di every Sunday. Asha wanted to climb the CN tower and go to Canada's Wonderland *all alone*. Asha wanted to know how it felt to ride a horse bareback. Asha thought love should make a woman feel like a banana split with all three scoops melting inside....That strong will, that unfettered enthusiasm for every experience, that appetite. That unadulterated, unmasked, *selfishness*." (172-73)

In the form of Asha, Devika creates a space where she can be the "transgressive other" of the "conformist self". She creates all that she wants to be in the form of her alter ego, Asha. Asha is all that the meek, dutiful, compliant Devika is not – she smokes, has short hair speaks in a 'lower sexier, huskier tone' as compared to Asha's 'high pitched Lata Mangeshkar voice', has a knowing laugh while Devika the 'good girl' never laughs and Asha wishes that people should love her for her own sake and not as someone's wife. Just as Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* is Jane's alter Ego, her 'truest and darkest double', as Gilbert and Gubar a physical manifestation of her inner being, Asha too may be called Devika's 'darkest double', a figment of Devika's imagination, who fulfils her desires; who brings forth the secrets from the innermost recesses.

Devika, recognizes Asha within herself but years of conditioning has trained her in keeping it submerged under the veneer of "such a sweet girl, such a good girl" (*English Lessons* 162). She believes that Asha had, "become a woman who had made the mistake of believing she was somehow ... significant" (174).

Devika disapproves of all this, finds it shameful and tries to “reason with her [Asha] all night” (173). She urges Asha to be grateful for all that she has and tries to convince her that “everyone would love you if you would only be nice” (173). Stuart Mill in his *The Subjection of Women* talks about “... the self-worship, the unjust self-preference” (62) nourished in the male child right from the moment of birth. So, in a son the worst of addictions are excusable, and acceptance is automatic. The girl, on the other hand, right from childhood must groom herself to fit into the mould of the “angel in the house”, to make herself acceptable and deserving of love. Piety, spirituality, complacency, confinement are traits taught to a woman. And Devika contemplates that Asha needs to ‘worship’ more. Worship is the opium provided to the weak, the women, to keep them “from thinking about things and why they are the way they are and even about why things are not the way they could be.” (*English Lessons* 173) Her installing of a statue of Natraj, a dancing Lord Shiva with his powerful foot on the neck of, ‘Apsamara’ the embodiment of ‘heedlessness’ and ‘forgetfulness’, of ‘spiritual ignorance’, to drill into Asha a sense of her own ‘insignificance’ is symbolic. Just as to subdue the demon, Lord Shiva had performed the cosmic dance, ‘Tandav’, a similar ‘Tandav’ ensues within Devika as she like Shiva tries to suppress the demon, stamping on it, breaking its back; the demon of desires, of self-assertion, of individuality, of her own ‘being’. (britannica.com).

Devika’s husband Ratan who has been in Canada for some years is now acculturated and is a liberal man to a great extent, and would have accepted Devika’s wishes more readily. However, Devika is herself too conditioned by patriarchy to overcome her inhibitions. Ratan aspires to move up in life, plans to further enhance the décor of his apartment before he invites his boss to dinner and decides that Devika “must wear a dress. And pantyhose, and no nose ring” (*English Lessons* 165). On another occasion he imagines Devika in a “black velvet skirt and a white silk jacquard blouse, like Peter Kendall’s wife and disapproves of her looking like the “Indian women ...teetering in their high heeled sandals on the slushy sidewalks, examining racks of readymade salwar kameezes from India and gossiping about Hindi film stars.” (165) He suggests that she learn to cook some Chinese and Italian dishes too, as he wishes to call his boss Peter Kendall for dinner. The custodian and upholder of Indian values Devika is loath to give up this important marker of Identity and for the first time voices her opinion that she would make Indian food for them. And when he says she needs to buy some Canadian clothes, “Try a skirt and blouse...” Devika changes the subject.

The diasporic movement thus leads to conflict arising out of the tussle between individual desires and the pressure to go by the book, resulting in a rupture of the self. In the process it has created a space where Devika who by habit “hated arguments”, questions her internalized patriarchy and seeks liberation which causes her inner turmoil. Devika, the convent educated, “homely” girl, becomes Asha and buys high heeled cowboy boots, black patent leather shoes, a jean jacket, motorcycle helmet, a bikini underwear, lace camisole, lipsticks etc. So deeply instilled are the patriarchal norms that for fear of being cast as “the devil in the flesh”, all that Devika wishes for herself is bought in the name of Asha. At the same time, Devika constantly tries to suppress the personality of Asha and persuades her to conform, supplicate and be grateful for all that she had, “You have a wealthy husband to take care of you. You even have a son. What more can a woman ask for?” (173).

The creation of Asha while on one hand is the manifestation of the fragmentation every diasporic individual undergoes to a varied extent. At the same time it specifically foregrounds the conflict a woman, oppressed and subjugated by the patriarchal social institutions undergoes once these forces are less rigidly enforced. Thus it underlines how habit and training deeply ingrain patriarchal values and condition the woman. Asha, significantly meaning ‘hope’, is Devika’s survival instinct at work, as she becomes the escape route for Devika, through whom she gives vent to her muted self. She tries to negotiate her inner strife by expressing her unconscious desires through Asha, her alter ego, while Devika continues to suppress them (174). Devika suffers from schizophrenia as a result of this tussle within. The rupture in her personality may never have occurred had she stayed back in India. The movement to Canada provides an occasion towards liberation of Asha, liberation of her suppressed being, the self she has abnegated for years. Stuart Mill says we don’t know the real ‘self’ of women as they are not allowed to grow naturally for “All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will ...but submission, and yielding to the control of others.”(57). Wollstonecraft also asserted that one is not born but becomes a woman. The narrative unfolds how Devika’s true self begins to surface but she is too scared to accept it and therefore it gets reflected through the character of Asha. In this way Devika transgresses into an area which for Indian women is a taboo in India, she ventures into the forbidden terrain through the character of Asha.

The individualistic ‘madwoman’ gradually begins to assert. Initially Devika insists on laying the table for three arguing that Asha is there and even serves food in Asha’s plate. Ratan’s outrage does not ruffle or deter her. Later she refuses to go to the grocery store with Ratan in the car asserting that “Asha wants to go for a walk”. And when Ratan shouts at her, Devika complains that Asha’s ears hurt when he shouts. Asha’s hurling out the ‘trusting, wondering, innocent, long haired doll out of the window. Twenty one stories” is a significant step towards the killing of “the angel in the house”. Ratan too begins to feel that Devika was “daring him to take Asha and make her disappear” (*English Lessons* 175). But the crossover is still not complete. When Devika and her husband, Ratan, are involved in a car accident Devika is finally eliminated. In the hospital, she tells Ratan that she was not Devika, but Asha, “Devika was afraid of living here, so she just ...flew away”. Devika owns up Asha, “I am Asha”, translated as hope, and finally is empowered enough to voice her wishes, “I want ... I want ... to go to Niagara Falls”. (180) The focus of her life and that of her camera, that Ratan had bought for ‘Asha’, shifts from Ratan to an openly expressed desire for taking pictures of the Niagara Falls and sending them home to India. More significantly she grows beyond fear, a fear that assails her from the moment she lands up without her own family, her own kith and kin, in Canada and brings herself to accept that, “Asha could live even if Ratan were to die” (*English Lessons* 180). She finally succeeds in killing the conformist self a precondition to the survival of Asha. A reassertion of the commonplace, “To be born again, you must first die”.

### **Conclusions**

The switch over from Devika to Asha is the shift that allows liberation – a movement wherein you can kill the “angel in the house” and let the “mad woman in the attic” live. The diasporic experience provides opportunity to this inner self, the suppressed to surface and thrive without inhibitions, and for the ‘angel in the house’ to fly out. Shauna thus subtly challenges the restrictive gender code of Punjabi diasporic community. She plunges deep into the inner realms of the female psyche, laying threadbare their longings and the guilt they experience through Devika as she strives to free herself from the structures and strictures of traditional family rules and roles. We find in the narrative a woman struggling and finally transgressing the normative, liberating herself from the codified subservient role. Shauna in several of her stories contests stereotypes through transgression of spheres by women who step out of the assigned gender roles and challenge the restrictive gender norms. The silencing of women is both literal and metaphorical as they face constant pressure to adhere and her narratives highlight that in most cases a woman’s search for home is not in terms of material comfort but a search in terms of

coming into her own, about accepting her needs, whether it is Kelly's need to learn driving in the story titled "English Lessons", or Devika's need to liberate herself from the clutches of convention. The cause of conflict is the gap between the individuals' desires and aspirations and expectations of the family and the community. These negotiations often result in psychological and emotional complications. The cause of conflict, by and large, in Baldwin's works is from within the self, within the community and from the family. The inner conflict resulting from diasporic movement has psycho-social dimensions as well. Shauna in that sense is a progressive voice for displaced Punjabi women.

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**BIO- NOTE**

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Madhuri Chawla (PhD) is an Associate Professor in the Department of English, Dyal Singh Evening College, University of Delhi. Her areas of interest include Translation, Diaspora and Women studies. She translates from Punjabi to English. She has also reviewed and sub-edited several books.