



## A WORLD OF NOT THEIR OWN: SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN'S *THE SELECTOR OF SOULS* AND THE ISSUE OF SEXUAL INEQUALITY IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT



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The process of globalization and the advancement in the field of information and communication technology have brought a revolutionary change in the life style and the attitude of Indian society. But socially, we still lag behind due to our conservative tendency of the patriarchal society where sexual inequality is at its peak because of the son preference over the daughter. The fact is that this is a severe problem but few want to talk about this scourge of hostile to female sex determination that is distorting Indian culture.

Shauna Singh Baldwin, an award winning Indo- Canadian novelist, has dealt with this sex selection issue in her novel *The Selector of Souls* (2012). My objective of writing this paper would be to account and analyse how Shauna Singh Baldwin, having the experience of both the Indian and the Canadian culture, has examined the scourge of hostile to female sex in India and why this serious issue needs instant resolve.

**Keywords:** *Sexual inequality, Silent problem, Patriarchal society, Son- mania, Domestic violence, Disgrace.*

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We proud Indians of 21st century rejoice in celebrations when a boy is born, and if it is a girl, a muted or no celebrations is the norm. Love for a male child is to such an extent that from the times immemorial we are killing our little girls during childbirth or before conception. Sexual inequality is at its peak because of the son preference over the daughter. Haryana, Punjab, Bihar, U. P. etc. are among states where the practice of sex selection is threatening the male- female ratio in India which is

1000:943 according to the census of 2011. The new medical facilities and technical machineries which are invented and designed for the welfare of society are being misused by narrow-minded people to satisfy their perverted ends. The mishandling of ultra- sound machine to determine the sex of the child in womb whether it is a male or female is disgusting. This tendency of determining the sex of the child in patriarchal social circle leads to the gruesome practice of female foeticide and infanticide because



of the son preference over daughter. This derogatory act not only violates the doctrine of equality between male and female but also can throw Indian society in such a state where there will be no woman and the Bollywood movie *Matrubhumi* or *A Nation without Women* concretizes it well. The fact is that this is a severe problem but a few want to talk about this epidemic of anti- female sex selection. Shauna Singh Baldwin, an award winning Indo- Canadian novelist, is one of them who has dealt with this sex selection issue in her recent novel *The Selector of Souls* (2012). She says, "There is no question, this is a terrible problem, and it's very silent problem" (theglobeandmail.com). The novel deals with the gruesome gender discrimination that Indian female world persistently encounters across all the classes, castes and creeds often beginning at birth or before with the abortion of female foetuses and the infanticide of the baby girls.

Born into a Sikh family in Canada, Shauna Singh Baldwin was brought up in India that enabled her to experience and notify the ongoing multifaceted social and cultural phenomena especially, the attitude of masculine social circle regarding female counterparts. Herself being exposed to gender discrimination in her family, she was well equipped to perceive the derogatory status of women which is prevailing in the traditional Indian society from ages. In her books like *English Lessons and Other Stories* and *What the Body Remembers*, she has given the richly effective portrayal of oppressed women in pre and post partition India. Her latest novel *The Selector of Souls* (2012) unfolds the widening epidemic of daughter aversion that is distorting the Indian society leading it towards a nation without women. The story of the novel centres around two leading female characters of two different classes; Damini, a Hindu widow of economically poor class and Anupam or Sister Anu, who is married to a business man, Vikas of Delhi. The novel begins with a scene that is terrifying and disgusting yet strangely sympathetic. Set in a village named Gurkot in Himalayan region, a young woman Leela gives birth to her third child, actually a baby daughter, with the help of her mother Damini. But the birth of the daughter brings no joy to the family

rather the mother is humiliated for giving birth to a female child as most of the Indian women are abused and cursed by the family and society for delivering a baby without a male sexual organ. And the father, Chunnilal, a truck driver, refuses to name the child and says, "she isn't worth naming" anticipating the cost of dowry. Consequently, Leela also turns her head away from her new born baby to feed and nourish the infant, because a baby without a family name is not expected to survive respectfully in the society. Realising the poignant, non- extant position of a female sex in the deeply ingrained "classic patriarchal belt", in which a girl suffers from the crisis of "someone", Damini, shockingly enacts the plan to sacrifice her infant granddaughter in the name of Anamika Devi and Lord Golunath proclaiming that this world is not fit for girls and women and appeals, "Release this Atman, girl body. Let it return to the place that continues long before and long after this world. Let it take shape when this world is better for girls." (09).

On the other hand, the subplot of the novel narrates the tale of Sister Anu (Anupam) who wants to remain unmarried and childless in order to stop the fast growing population of the country. However, like every Indian girl, she is conditioned to believe that marriage is a vocation, and a girl has no existence outside the periphery of the threshold that forces her to get married no matter if she is reluctant. But as the distribution of resources and power in traditional society have never been equitable and women are marginalised in terms of gender, class and caste, so the marriage proves to be a nightmare for Anu, her domain being strictly defined and confined with a complete acceptance of husband's decisions. She is mistreated and degraded for being a woman with all her suspended dignity of being an individual. Like most of the women of the traditional family, she is brutally beaten and even raped by her husband, Vikas, and marital rape is a fact which still is not accounted to accept in Indian families. As a South Indian poet and thinker, Periyar vouchsafed remarked, the concept of the husband-wife's relation is one of master and slave's in which husband is claimed to have every right to treat his wife as he wants and people overlook it saying it is a



personal domestic matter. Ameer Sultana in her article "Battered in the Safe Haven: Women and Domestic Violence" well articulates:

Neither social scientists nor historians have labelled violence in the family as a social problem. It remains invisible, because whatever is happening within the four walls of the house is regarded as a 'private issue'. Any interference in this matter is considered as a breach of 'privacy of a person'. (37)

This personal matter of sexual violence against Anu forces her to become the mother of an unwanted baby girl that only heightens her trouble because the birth of a daughter in Indian family is seen not as a blessing but as an evil omen and she is constantly harassed by the family for not giving birth to a son.

To understand the practice of gender discrimination and sex selection we need to examine the cultural basis of son preference in India. The reasons behind what is commonly called "son mania" are unfortunately inextricably imbedded in Indian culture. In ancient Indian sacred texts like Vedas, a son's birth is likened to a sunrise in the abode of gods and to have a son is as essential as taking food at least once a day, whereas a daughter's birth is a cause for great sadness and disappointment (Ramanamma, 1980). This is the belief what makes the situation more negligible and miserable. When Anu gives birth to a daughter enforced out of rape by her husband, her birth is upheld as a disgrace on the family and the mother is humiliated and disrespected because Vikas wanted "a boy". A boy, a boy, everyone wants a son" (47). To avoid the disgrace of the family he sends his daughter Chetna to Rano in Canada despite the truth that Anu was reluctant to send her away. But a wife's wishes and decisions are not given value. On the other hand, at the birth of a daughter Chunnilal is so disappointed that he refuses to name her. He says, "If it's a girl, I don't want to see her...let the gods find her a name, I refuse to name her" (244). While Leela feels so ashamed of bearing a girl that she wishes "that the girl had never been born" (245). Even Kiran bewails for birthing a daughter again and when the next time she is again provided with a girl, she, unethically, against the motherly feeling, commits the heinous act of stealing

the new born son of the Sweeper woman Goldina in the labour room to avoid the disgust and disgrace in the family. In the masculine society it is believed that a person must have done some wrong deeds in its past life, that is why in the next life, it is given the form of a girl who is always subjected to suffering. When the infant daughter is born from the womb of Leela, Damini ponders over: "What terrible deeds must this soul have done in a past life, to now be punished by taking the form of a girl. What will she face but suffering that leads to more suffering" (236) meaning thereby a human body without a male organ has no world of its own.

Since Indian society is patrilineal, patriarchal and patrilocal, the men of the society tend to prefer sons while the daughters are subordinated and marginalised. It is the son who will carry on the name of the family business, will look after the parents in old days and will stay forever with them while the daughters will go to the husband's family leaving their native place and do not make any contribution to her parents. The Indian saying that bringing up a girl is like watering a neighbour's plant, exemplify the feeling of wasted expenditure on raising a daughter. It is for the sake of a son that Anu falls in to the valley of domestic violence. Her husband Vikas and his mother both torture her physically, mentally and emotionally. Anu tells her uncle Sharad that her mother in law wishes her to leave the house because "she wants Vikas to have a wife who can produce a son" (95) but irony is that even her Uncle supports the demand of bridegroom's family and suggests Anu to have a "boy" with the help of ultrasound technique. He delights in validating Mrs. Kohli's expectation for a grandson to continue family name because it is "natural". How can you have a business named "Kohli and Daughters?" meaning thereby to run the family name and business it is must to have a son.

A very significant factor contributing to son preference is that of economics. Daughters are upheld as economic liability to families whereas sons are justified as a great asset. One of the most publicized reasons for this disparity is dowry system which has now turned to be the greatest evil of the society. In many parts of India, particularly in North



India, the practice of dowry enforces the parents, either of high class or low class to accumulate a good amount of money to be paid to the grooms side either as a compulsion or as a social status because, as Rita Patel, M.D. figures out, "failure to deliver the offered dowry or honour further requests may result in so-called "dowry death" or "bride burning" in which the groom's family kills the bride to allow the groom to remarry and bring in a more substantial dowry" (07). The issue of dowry, which is no less than a snake for the second sex, assists in instigating the marriage of girls in minor ages below the legal marriage age of eighteen. In the novel, *Tubelight*, a village woman who has a fourteen years old daughter, says to Damini, "And don't forget, later marriage means higher dowry" (210). The marriage of girls in minor ages turns out to be one of the basic reasons for the violence against women. There can be accounted several other reasons like, funeral rituals, potential of earning money, the need for men as protectors, the ideal family size comprising only of two children that perpetuate the preference for sons and discrimination against the daughters.

Keeping all these prevailing factors of patriarchy in mind, we move forward to understand why Damini was suddenly compelled to murder the infant granddaughter making her heart as stone and why she was leading pregnant women of Gurkot for ultrasound test and get aborted if it is a female child. She hopes that telling pregnant women the sex of their child will help prevent infanticide, the terrible deed that only increased her sense of remorse. She wanted simply to save the coming generation of female side from the discrimination and violence inflicted upon them by the male counterparts who considered the birth of a daughter as a curse for the family. She herself had been the victim of gender discrimination because she was born as the fifth daughter of her mother who was humiliated because the father "had found a second bride to bear him sons" and her mother sets herself to burn alive. Damini feels guilty and holds herself responsible for the death of her mother because if she had been dead in her womb her mother would not have been ashamed of giving birth to the fifth daughter. She bewails:

I killed my mother by taking shape, entering the world when I did. Couldn't have I waited? Why didn't I listen to her wishes and die in her womb? Couldn't have I gone to some other woman and not added to the burdens of a woman who already had four daughters? (230).

This is the reason she intends to avoid the arrival of girls into this world until it is fit for them and guides the women for abortion. However, she later comes to realisation that the problem of discrimination and violence against women cannot be lessened by stopping the birth of female children rather it will simply bring disharmony and loss of ethical and moral values in society. Therefore, to amend her previous misdeeds she organises a society named Women's Survival Society to assure that no girl is killed or abandoned by the family and women are treated politely and respectfully by their menfolk. She makes the people of Gurkot aware and brings consciousness in the name of Goddess Anamika Devi that if they worship her they can kill a girl who is no less than the image of Devi. She also makes them swear that if any girl is born the father will not refuse to name her and even if he refuses to do this the older woman of the family will give her name to the girl. Damini strives to spread out the message among the people that one who creates life must not be denied by the right to be born. They need to be treated equally and given values for the dignity of being an individual.

In this way, Shauna Singh Baldwin, in spite of being a perennial outsider, shows close observation and understanding of the hard core problem of Indian society i.e. the issue of sex selection and marginalisation of the second sex, writing outspokenly against the traditional society that produced her. There are a few writers who show their deliberate interest in writing about this terrible and silent problem. She accepts it is a very silent problem "but if you are going to do fiction, I think you focus on the unseen. You focus on the things that are silent in our lives". It is the biggest irony of Indian society that women, at one end, command deification and glorification but, at the other end, they confront subjugation and suppression. In this



context the Boranian's opinion in the Preface of *Empowerment of Rural Women* is relevant:

Cutting across the major religions in India, women dominate the divine world as goddesses with reverence and restraint by the humanity. As mothers in the mundane world, they command respect and regard from the society. But, then as women in the family and community, they face hardship and humiliation from not only men but the women too. (vii)

This kind of dual standard of patriarchal mind set towards women needs to be uprooted from society in order to address the democratic ideals of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity without any disgrace of gender bias. The women of today need to reach a new stage, "the take of stage", towards greater independence of choice and self as Swami Vivekananda has addressed somewhere that when a woman moves forward, the family moves, society moves and the nation moves. This impetus would enable them to become equal social partner of men and they can have the world of their own.

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