

**DEVIKA IN DELUSION: ENGLISH LESSONS AND OTHER STORIES BY
SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN**

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Abstract:

Shauna Singh Baldwin's story 'Devika' depicts the psyche of a woman in adapting herself in the alien land, who is habituated to live in a different home culture. The entire story illustrates the protagonist Devika's struggle for adapting herself to new Canadian life and culture with her husband. The story depicts the dilemma of individuals who are sandwiched between the demands of two cultures diametrically opposite to each other. It also portrays the plight of the Indian woman as she is raised to serve and be subservient to her family and in the process loses her identity and individuality. In her struggle to accommodate herself to the alien culture, she imagines her friend Asha, who accultured herself to the foreign culture. She starts to behave like Asha with little conversations and makes someone to listen; in a nutshell, Devika removes her mask and enters into the shoes of Asha, which she never wanted. At the end of the story, Devika transforms herself as Asha to make her life comfortable with Ratan. After transformation, Devika appears to be more Canadian than Indian. Absorption caused at the cost of relationship, bond, love and affection are partially accepted. The transformation is nothing but a conflict between traditional India and modern Canada.

Key Words: *Devika, Ratan, Asha, immigrant, culture, transformation.*

'English Lessons' is a portrayal of the first generation immigrants' situations and compromises to get assimilated into western society. Devika protagonist of the story voluntarily undergoes a reformation in order to get assimilated into the new society. The change over period in between is chosen by the writer to elaborate the stress, disappointment and psychological conflict. Of the three concepts mentioned here, the last one is expediently dealt with the writer. "Devika" is about that loneliness and anxiety of a newly married desi woman in an unknown land with almost an unknown man-her husband- whom she does not even recognize owing to long separation after marriage. Devika is an ideal docile girl, a prototype Indian homemaker. She, being literally a homemaker always tries hard to create native environment as they are used to in India. She would prepare for her husband's favourite Indian cuisine. It is something like waiting for a distinguished guest every time the husband comes home. After a short while in the narrative, Ratan and Devika have a short interaction about the casual homely activities. When Devika tries to explain how his mother took care to pack things for him, Ratan comments "Mum shouldn't have bothered" Ratan as a man fails to understand maternal love in particular and woman in general. It's a reflection of treatment of a woman by a man. Startlingly, Devika's approach to understanding emotions is in contrast with that of Ratan's. She has great expertise in reading people. So, she is ready to transform herself and into someone who others expect her to be. This singular feature in Devika helps her to surrender herself to make over into an altogether new personality.

In the initial period of her arrival to Canada, Devika was hopeful that she would keep herself busy and can get adjusted to the new daily chores and culture as well. Ratan, Devika's husband tries his best to

keep her engaged so that she would not feel lonely. He attempts to take her to different places of interest such as Niagara Falls, shopping malls and so on. Nevertheless, Devika is tired of the journey. Inevitably, she went all alone to Canada to whom just an occasional car trip out of Delhi was a test of endurance. Devika was least interested in visiting any place of interest as a journey in her mother's words the Hindustani word 'safar' was real English suffer to her. "It seemed appropriate that the Hindustani word for journey, safar, sounded like the English suffer." (ELAOS162) Ironically, the journey Devika took up to an alien land Canada was nothing but undergoing a great testing time.

Devika was really making some progress. She had settled and was keeping the house as if she'd lived here all her life. The narrative- the key point which Baldwin wanted to deal with in the story, opens as Devika was getting prepared as usual for her husband's arrival, reading a letter from Asha, her schoolmate.

The whole lot in the story of Devika would have been insipid hadn't there been the intervention of Asha, Devika's school buddy. Memory of her school time associate, Asha keeps coming to her mind.

As days passed by, loneliness befell the experiences of Devika. She is present in Canada but her thoughts revolve in the memories of home in India. By way of grave words expressed by Devika, the writer adroitly transfers the intensity of her solitude to the reader's dismay. She exclaims 'Canada was a country with more acres of land than people'- symbolizing lack of social company and warmth in hearts.

When she is all alone both physically and emotionally, Devika craves to have all her family members, her parents to pamper her, train her in household errands and so on. She feels awfully lonely and therefore strongly desires a companion, apart from her relatively cold husband Ratan. This is the first instance when the readers are introduced to Devika's mild psychological disorder 'emptiness syndrome.'

On the other hand, Ratan, Devika's husband, is busy and tensed with his career. Ratan's anxiety is a paradigm of skin discrimination between the natives and immigrants. The vice-president of Ratan's firm, Peter Kendall is always a source of stress to Ratan. Another important concern of Ratan is, to please his sisters who were also present in the same land and got used to the life there. His stress is whether Devika is accepted by his sisters as a suitable homemaker to their brother. Ratan is Indian born and whatever familial practices were followed for ages are followed by Ratan too. In the practice of age-old customs, Ratan is no exception.

Devika experiences self-critical conscience reflecting social standards that have been learnt in India since the time she observed/realized her environment. At first, Ratan is relatively insensible to the gradual changes coming in the attitude of Devika. But he notices Devika often retiring quietly into her room, behaving as if there were one more person and speaking to the non-existing person, Asha. She has allotted a room for her imaginative persona, Asha. Very casually she reports to her husband that Asha *is* staying along with them. But, he is not ready to pay attention to Devika or at least be compassionate enough to spare his time to her.

One day, Ratan was unable to digest the sight of a third plate being served where there were only two to dine, he and Devika. At the dining table, Devika serves for three people- a clear indication of figment of the imagination. An unusual, repeated and weird behavior of Devika makes Ratan mad. Ratan is filled with trepidation as he notices all these changes. Devika is absolutely unaware of what she has been doing. Devika's illusion continues when Devika says to Ratan that she is showing lights of CN tower to Asha. She imagines herself as another character. The character of Devika has developed a strange disorder which can be termed as a dissociative disorder in psychology. It is close to identity disorder in its features.

Though odd events occur every now and then, Ratan wants all his activities to go on as usual. This mindset throws light on the apathy of man to the psychological turbulence, stress and turmoil of woman. Even when Ratan understands Devika's alter ego, it is immaterial to him whether it is Devika or Asha. Such a stance of man towards a woman is conveniently ignored since the man in India is brought up with male chauvinism which is treated and considered to be his legitimate right. As patriarchy is followed in India, wife of a man is taken for granted as a subservient to man in all domestic concerns and needless to care or

have concern for a woman or her problems. This issue has a direct bearing of resentment towards patriarchal society. Baldwin's favoritism for feminism is crystal clear with Ratan's deportment towards Devika's predicament.

The actual account of the short story 'Devika' is based on the psychological glitch due to the maladjustment of Devika to the lifestyle in Canada. Devika's story is a very good illustration of the conflict between two opposite selves. One becoming absolutely another person and the phenomenon in the course has become the subject of interest in the narration of Devika's story. The clash between the rebellious Asha and docile Devika represents spar between reality and imagination.

Devika is an archetypal middle-class woman who is unconsciously influenced by the environs in which she is born and reared. She puts in her highest efforts to see that she suits to the feel of her husband. She is deeply impressed by her mother's words that "docile girls are good girls and good girls are docile" (ELAOS 162) In her tryout, she suffers severe conflict within herself. As a single being, she undergoes mentally an imbalanced and divided state, where she is compelled to play two characters- all the same with only one motive- a craving to please Ratan. Since Devika is maladjusted, she is hurled to a psychological vortex. Evidently, Devika does not possess a fiercely uncompromising nature, she is not bold enough to state her desires openly, and she invents altogether a new personality, Asha.

In due course of time, Ratan feels intense repugnance about Devika's wacky words and activities. He grumbles about the deplorable state of Devika's mental illness and names the whole scenario as 'This Asha nonsense'. It echoes Ratan's abhorrence for Devika-Asha duo. He even secretly wonders if his parents made an enquiry into the family background of Devika whether there had been traces of psychological infirmity.

Ratan is in a fix as to whether he should tell the status of Devika to the doctor when he goes to talk to the doctor about his stressful career and its impact on his general health but refrains as he believes it isn't really so grave to pay attention to. Based on the input given by Ratan, doctor analyzes that Ratan suffered loss of hair because of all those reasons that Ratan disclosed except the duo mess. In the novel *Illusions* "Priya engulfed in her thought process in which she keeps on talking to Vijay but mother finds nobody there" (Zeba Mehdi)

Ratan follows a technique that his father adopted once- resentment with false silence-But this trick did not work. Hence, Ratan tries to resort to other means. He notices that she admired the photographs, of course, all were his. With the confidence that his brothers in law do not sneak into his tension, he pretends as if he wanted to present a wonderful camera to Devika. But the intent behind the present is to get Devika rid of Asha's snag and restores her old self. As per his anticipation, Devika behaves normal as long as she *is* Devika. Ratan is forced to believe that Asha did exist. In fact, he wants to enjoy liberty from Devika and wishes he were the husband of Asha but not Devika. On the other hand, oddly Asha is the alter ego of Devika.

Contradictorily enough, little by little, Devika is assuming herself as Asha. A relentless struggle goes on between Devika's divided selves. Devika's conflict is between what she actually is and she ought to have been as desired by her husband. Devika realizes that there is low risk low prize; high risk high prize. The Indian traditionally bred Devika is unable to suppress the voice of Asha. Devika tries to resort to an illusion, her schoolmate Asha, through whom she bravely speaks her thoughts out like 'Asha would like to see Niagara Falls' etc. To make her husband delightful, Devika gets transformed. From now, Devika's position is overtaken by Asha. She is Asha, the phrase for hope to get used to the western culture. Like the other bold character portrayed by Baldwin, Naina who didn't want to bring her baby into this world, Devika puts forth powerful resistance in the alter ego of Asha.

Asha wants to do all those things, activities to adapt herself to the western trend of living. None of these, could Devika have even and ever thought of, as she hails from India with the label 'a docile girl'. Being the alter persona as Asha, Devika is disappointed to understand her friend's transformation into a

woman obeying the constraints of tradition and duty. That speaks about the practice of humble attitude of women in man's presence. A powerful resistance is put up by Devika as a result of conflict between Asha and Devika. Devika as long as she is Devika never denied visiting Vandanadi every Sunday as a subdued wife. Devika's pleasure or displeasure does not have an outlet. But, Asha is irreverent. However, Devika's annoyance to meet Vandanadi is exhibited through the character of Asha. (Devika's alter ego)

Devika feels that Asha could enjoy conjugal love better if she were Asha forever. And hence, Devika wants to learn, do a number of things which she would not do. To begin with, one of the illustrations at home is, Devika didn't ever try to think of worshipping Nataraj-the dancing Shiva. Besides this, Ratan didn't encourage decorating the idol in the living room. But when she understands that she has to get evolved, she decides to be individual and keeps the idol out which Ratan banned. Here, Asha is not prepared to oblige any longer. The single person playing two characters- Devika, a true Indian docile, mild girl who feels it is her duty to live to the expectation of her husband and the other, Asha who is ready to get thoroughly changed for Ratan, who wanted to see his wife, an ultra-modern American styled wife. The inner psychosomatic struggle of Devika results in serious conflict between two personalities. The outcome is a divided self of a sole self living in two roles. What she actually is and she ought to have been as desired by her husband becomes the bottom line of transformation.

Asha is eccentric and loves the culture of the alien land. She comprehends that Canada *is* her home which hitherto was alien culture in the person of Devika. Hence Devika is ready to lose her original self to become Asha once for all.

Once, as per their weekly itinerary to Vandanadi's house, Devika tells Ratan that Asha was ready to go. Ratan nonetheless is prepared to accept that he has been living with Asha and not Devika. On their way, Devika perceives that her dupatta is caught in the door and feels inconvenient. In her effort to liberate the caught dupatta, Devika gets slipped and she accidentally flies away in air. Ratan is stupefied and shudders at this unexpected twist of things. The writer Baldwin deftly drew the conclusion symbolically. The dupatta flying off and torn into shreds in the accident is figurative of Devika leaving the image of Devika, an Indian docile girl. There is the disappearance of alter ego from Devika and now only Asha exists. The conversion is completed. Asha geared herself up to face life with or without someone to take care of her.

Urvashi Butalia in her work, 'The Other Side of Silence' opines that for the majority of Indian women, marriage is an abduction anyway, violation, an assault usually by a stranger- Baldwin's Devika lives up to the same depiction till she was Devika. But there is an unpredictable alteration. During the car accident, there is a specific mention of Devika's consent for the touch by her husband during daylight-an indication of the thorough transformation of Devika to Asha- now a Canadian adapting herself to the Canadian style of life. In other words, Devika is an epitome of millions of immigrants putting mindful effort to embrace the culture of abroad. End of psychological conflict in Devika resulted in a strange disorder in her personality. The psychological status of many, especially of those, who are neither occidental nor oriental undergo excruciating stress is analogous to that of Devika. The personalities of many immigrants' experience turbulence which gives rise to maladjustment. At this juncture, it is pointless to say that it is a global phenomenon. But the worst phase is experienced by Indians- the people staying abroad nevertheless breathing Indian set of values, the people of such a country which is known for cultural significance and human values since ages.

Devika craving to cater to the desires of Ratan adapts herself to Canadian style of life in the process of which she loses her original self. Amazingly, Devika's innate attitude to mould herself to the likes and dislikes of others is the latent motivating element in her transformation as Asha. The writer very deeply probes into the psychological aspects of living abroad without a proper identity, accountability, liberty through the characters of Ratan and Devika.

Baldwin depicts that the intensity and yearning to be accepted and assimilated is so chronic, that immigrants expediently disregard the paranoia problems occurring in the relationships. A fathomless gap

remains between the natives and the immigrants as the relationship of kith and kin is also at stake on account of psychological issues. The immigrants suffer between their conscious efforts to get adapted to the new culture and innate traditional brought up, set of values, more so in the case of Indians as in the case of Devika. Baldwin's caliber to deal broader scope of character sketching is witnessed through the character of Tania. Tania feels that she need not change herself and to be someone else. It is in contrast with Devika's disappearance and Asha's persona instead of original Devika. The self-killing is seen in Devika when she comments after the car accident "Devika was afraid of living here, so she just...flew away" (ELAOS 180). Baldwin offers a compassionate insight into the worlds of women through her distinguished treatment of characters. It would not be unfair to affirm that Baldwin considers the characters in the feminist perspective. Like the other bold character portrayed by Baldwin, Naina who didn't want to bring her baby into this world, Devika puts forth powerful resistance in the alter ego of Asha. Ratan finally accepts Devika as Asha.

Baldwin displays the covert and overt conflicts in the minds of her heroines and their rebellion and resistance required for validating the self, which is however stifled by the dominating society or by the pressure of circumstances. (Singh 2010)

Generally, women swallow and turn bitter in the face of such contradictions. Devika had to struggle herself to accommodate to the new culture and to transform herself for the sake of her husband Ratan. But Devika as Asha is brave and affirms her feminine identity and individualism. Devika succeeds herself to slight negotiations necessary for asserting her feminine identity.

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