

# EXPLORING THE CONFLUX OF CULTURE WITH DIASPORIC PERSUASION IN *THE TIGER CLAW* BY SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the representation of multiculturalism in Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *The Tiger Claw*. Further, it examines the representation of diverse cultural elements in society, highlighting the intricate nature of cultural constructs. The article explores the complex emotions experienced by immigrants, which can result in their displacement. It emphasizes the conflicting feelings they encounter when trying to adjust to unfamiliar surroundings. Moreover, the article explores the evolution of customs and traditions in response to changing circumstances, providing insight into their transformation over time. The focus is on the survival of Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh communities before the partition, highlighting their cultural resilience. The article highlights the process of cultural assimilation, which occurs through direct personal interactions as well as indirect exposure to media such as television, movies, and literature. Culture is a fundamental element of both individuals and societies, playing a crucial role in shaping our distinct qualities and shared sense of identity.

## **Introduction**

Culture is viewed as a symbolic construction of a vast array of a social group's real-life experiences. Culture is the chronicle of a society's history. It is the epitome of a society's past events. Since various sections of society have a unique history, the culture also becomes correspondingly unique. Each culture is marked by the social and economic conditions of a group. Culture also differs in terms of wealth, power and privilege. This paper explores the confluence of cultural characteristics of a society from the perspective of Diaspora.

The term culture has acquired a significant meaning over the years. One of the early scholars of cultural studies, Williams Raymond in *Culture and Society* defines culture as "an individual habit of mind; the state of intellectual development of a whole society; the arts; and the whole new way of life of a group of people" (16). Culture aims at aspiring excellence in all walks of life. Culture promotes the quality of a person amicably and peacefully. Culture is

the very essence of life. Williams Raymond confronts the Victorian observance of elucidating culture as something significant to the higher and middle classes. Williams does not eliminate any community of people, even the lower class, from the scope of culture. Culture is a process of teaching and not merely a body of intellectual and imaginative work. With the passage of time, culture achieved a new scope concerning societal, economic and political changes.

Culture can have been treasured openly from our social contacts and indirectly from television, movies, books, magazines, etc. Since culture is considered as the definition for every single person and society. Culture sustains the characteristics of the human race. Edward Said has something informative to say about culture. Culture is not a matter of possession. It is the common experiences that form culture.

"Culture is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures"(84).

He highlights the significant influence of culture on various aspects such as arts, literature, and communication. Culture and literature are closely intertwined. Literature extends beyond a practical depiction of human existence. This comprehensive perspective encompasses various aspects of human existence, such as cultural characteristics, social hierarchy, and systems of authority within a given society. Literature serves as a repository for various cultural elements, encompassing beliefs, knowledge, values, and practises within society. Edward Said has acknowledged the correspondence between literature, culture and Society thus:

Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; it has regularly seemed otherwise to me, and certainly my study of orientalism has convinced me that Society and culture can only be understood and studied together (27).

Said highlights the idea that culture and society are interdependent. Both these entities are interrelated and cannot be separated. Further, literature represents social, cultural and universal values that can affect the life of human beings in different ways. Literary creation has its background in various social activities such as language, economics, politics, ethnicity, race, gender, class and culture. Terry Eagleton says a literary work self comes to be seen as amysterious organic unity... It is 'spontaneous' rather than rationally calculated, creative rather than mechanical (17).

AvtarBrah is an eminent Diasporic theorist, specialized in the race, gender and ethnic identity issues. She insists that diasporians are straddling with two cultures, the culture of their homeland and the culture of the adopted host land. Both cultures are responsible for stimulating diasporic literature because residing in an adopted land forces them to search for their home, tradition, culture, history and identity. AvtarBrah with regard to Space Theory says that diaspora is the new space and introduces the idea of diasporic space. It is the space where diaspora, border and location are inherent. As AvtarBrah writes in *Cartographies of Diaspora*:

Contesting Identities, Distinct diaspora communities are created out of the 'confluence of narratives' of different journeys from the 'old country' to the new which create the sense of a shared history. Differences of gender, class, culture, religion, and language make diaspora spaces dynamic and shifting and it is open to repeated construction and reconstruction. The diasporic writing draws our attention to an important aspect of our time in which responsibilities of the people go across the national boundaries. The new spaces and identities and relationships have to be created which help the people to move across boundaries and to engage difference and otherness as part of a discourse. Thus, diasporic writing focuses the intellectual's need to move away from a mere language of critique for are definition as part of a language of transformation and hope. It is only on this part that struggle is against racism,

class structures and other forms of oppression. (151)

### **Baldwin's challenge to the cultural constructs of the society**

The article ponders on the cultural insight of the writer Baldwin who challenges the cultural constructs of the society by exploring the story of Noor Inayat Khan in *The Tiger Claw* who experienced cultural hybridity during the Second World War. Shauna Singh Baldwin's hybrid identity and her experiences of diaspora let her create such marvelous characters like Noor from *The Tiger Claw*, which is much like the personality of Baldwin. Baldwin is fascinated by the character of Noor Inayat Khan, an Indian princess who spied for the French resistance during World War second. Baldwin was intrigued by the character of Noor Inayat Khan for entirely different reasons.

According to Stuart Hall, it is the diasporic culture that produces hybrid identities and fragmented self which often straddle between two cultures. The diaspora experience is characterised by acknowledging the importance of diversity and heterogeneity in shaping identity. This conception of identity embraces and incorporates differences, rather than disregarding them. It is characterised by a sense of hybridity. Diaspora identities are continuously shaping and perpetuating themselves through processes of transformation and differentiation.

Here in this novel *The Tiger Claw*, Noor moves on by the conception of identity and tries to be a part of the society by not revealing her real identity. Noor is introduced as a racially and socially hybrid individual during the War. She is the daughter of Hazrat Inayat Khan, an Indian Sufi Muslim and an American mother, Nora Baker Eddy. She is the great-great-granddaughter of Tipu Sultan, the eighteenth-century ruler of Mysore. Noor's strict Sufi Muslim family rejects her love for Armand Rivkin for the only reason that he belongs to the Jewish community.

Though she is disheartened by the rules imposed upon her by her family, she keeps on valuing her family bonds. She never straight forwardly opposes her uncle or brother, even though she realizes that what they have done isn't right. Though she is a dedicated Muslim who fell in love with a Jew and continues her relationship with him, she feels that love is above all religions. Noor is caught between her culture and religious practices, and her love for Armand, a Jew, who belongs to a completely different culture and community. Later, Noor decides to sacrifice her culture.

Thus, her attitude and beliefs are decisively grounded in the path she has chosen for herself. Later, she decides to confront the cultural and social constructs which restrained the path of humanity. Noor was against war and Hitler's brutal conduct towards Jews and humanity at large. Noor sacrifices her life as a French resistance fighter for Nazi-occupied France, although she condemns Churchill's policies of inaction that starved millions in India. Being aware of her position as a colonial of British occupied India, she accepts the job of a French resistance fighter. Her ambivalent attitude is the result of her hybrid identity. She forfeits her life for her love, works for the country of which she is part from birth and values her Sufi Muslim and Indian identity. Noor's hybrid identity is the only reason behind her compassionate attitude and because of this, she feels connected to every place, religion, caste or culture.

In the words of Noor,

I felt connected to all my countries in this work-England and India, America, Russia and France. For once I was part of them all, necessary to the survival of nations, a finger-tappings ender connected to Colonel Buckmaster's women radio receivers and because I was working with people. (423)

In Noor's character, we witness a mix of multiple cultures. Noor's life was shaped by multiculturalism, her diverse heritage, upbringing in the Sufi environment, her opinions, and her affection for Jews makes her a complex personality. Noor's identity is a complex one,

ever challenging the norms of the European world and ideas of racism, supremacy, color biases, world politics, imperialism, horrors of war, human displacement, exile, etc.

Baldwin has clearly said that she has to fictionalize the long-lasting impact of World War II war on people's lives. Baldwin described in *The Tiger Claw* by creating a fictional character to tell the facts of contemporary time. Kabir's view regarding War is as below:

As a colonial, born in Britain of a father from an Indian princely state subservient to the Raj, he felt Britain's historic lust for power and its rule in countries it occupied to be only slightly less virulent than Germany's, and scoffed internally at the English view of themselves as being less racist, more humane than Hitler. Over the last four years more than three million Indians – many Muslims like himself – died of starvation in British India, thousands in the streets of Calcutta, from deprivation far worse than any he had witnessed riding through the villages of France or Germany, many times worse than privation in blitzed and bombed London. (27)

### **Baldwin's characters entangled in defining their sense of belonging**

Baldwin's interests in Indian history and the situation of individuals during the British reign can be seen in the previously mentioned thoughts. The identity has been converged in the self as the characters couldn't choose their belongingness. Noor could retain the Indian culture and customs generally as though she had an affection for India during the two-year stay at Baroda, Gujarat, India. In contrast, Kabir couldn't have that feeling of being an Indian even if he knows the Qur'an better than all his cousins.

Moreover, we focus on diasporic culture as it is unique and diasporic people have the different cultural background than the country that they are presently living in. The same is the case with Noor. Culture assumes a significant part here as Noor's mom wanted Noor to marry a boy who belongs to Sufism, as expected by Uncle Tajuddin. Her mother and uncle never approved of the life that Noor wanted to live. Even though her mother is interested, she denied this relationship because her mother is bewildered between the love for the divine (ishq-i-haqiqi) and love for a man (ishq-i-mijaji) as called by her Abbajan.

The inter-religious love affair is unacceptable. She argued that Abbajan had taught her that love in any form is pure, whether from idols or the person as it flows from the Divine. She has continued her argument that if Allah does not want her to get married to Armand, then why He has aroused the feeling in her. Why he has created a passion in her. God does things for a reason. He raised the passion in her for a reason.

I learned that my body belonged not to me but to my family, and it was my uncle's right to say yea or nay to marriage. Because I lived in Paris, he said didn't mean that I was no longer Indian and Muslim. He expected me to deposit my life in his care, and was so hurt and insulted at my slightest hesitation. (75)

This also shows the cultural mind set of how these Indian families generally try to be dominant over women. This is a cultural attitude. Baldwin's observation of cultural beliefs has been symbolized here. The author has clearly shown the patriarchal Society of India denies the freedom for youngsters to select their partners as the Indian Society believes that it is a part of the culture. It is the eldest members of the family who decide with whom his/ her daughter/son should marry. Liking/disliking are not the notions for bride and groom but for the parents. It is a matter of prestige and respect to marry in one's community and marrying outside the community is forbidden by the Society. Eye striking matter is his father could have married to an American girl. Still, being a Muslim girl, she is not allowed to marry outside the community, especially when the prospective husband is a Jew. However, brought up in different culture people never come out from their old customs and tradition which is in fact decided by the Society. She feels this is only a biological being of her that belongs to her family as they have given birth to it and so there is no scope for heart and mind. She has confessed the hypocrisy of his uncle's and thus, she has confessed the hypocrisy of the whole

community which has been structured under such a cultural phenomenon. The community migrated to other countries and tried to accept their culture. However, these people never left behind few conservative customs, and marriage is one of them. Marriage for Kabir also is a contract and he thinks Noor does not love Armand but pities him as he is a Jew. For Jews have been tormented for ages. Baldwin unveils the so-called virtues of the community and the shallow thoughts of human beings belong to a certain culture by Kabir's idea about marriage.

It is impossible that you could love Rivkin. You have never been in love, you don't know what it feels like. But you're tender-hearted. Yes, you have feelings, deep feelings. But you feel pity, not love. That's all one can feel for Jew – pity! But you – you care so little for this family that you can even think of marriage. Listen to me! If I marry an unbeliever, she will become Muslim. But if you marry Rivkin, Jews will inherit Afzal Manzil. That's disgusting. Think how you would feel if I told you I wanted to marry a man. Wouldn't you be disgusted? That's how I feel. (78)

Like in the case of Noor's mother, Armand's mother also belongs to a different community and culture. But after marriage, Armand's mother converted to Judaism and she was brought up following the same culture and not her catholic culture to which she belonged to earlier. Baldwin here shows that both Noor's and Armand's mother accept the culture of their life partners by sacrificing their love for their own culture and tradition, which now Noor also does. The writer adds a faint tint of culture through this portrayal. In the tradition and culture that these people belong to, women are subjugated by men and this is pretty much evident in these characters as well. Armand describes his mother to Noor and she is describing the same to her in the following words:

She was born a catholic, and sometimes went to mass. But she took the ritual bath and converted to Judaism, and joined your grandfather in France. When Armand was born in Paris, she learned to raise him as a Jew. Armand took me to meet her the very first Rosh Hashanah after we met, and she accepted me immediately. I was born in Moscow like her, she said. She told me about the first time she made challah... (119)

The above description shows the transformation of the entire people turned away from their country and religion. They even change their identity for the life they loved. The World has started changing and how the borders started melting down can be observed. Baldwin criticizes the general conceptions of boundaries and the identity constructed by the boundaries and the religion they are following. How Noor's family is biased for the family of Armand has been largely criticized as mentioned here:

When he first heard of our love in early 1934, my uncle shouted that he had no objection whatsoever to Armand's religion and, not being Christian, had no tradition of hatred against Jew; that he objected only to Armand's mother's work "as a washerwoman" If that one fact were different, he said, he might have agreed to our marriage, if only to save my tarnished reputation. But since Armand could not change his mother or his past (nor wished to, being so proud of her), my uncle's impossible condition was just another way of forbidding our marriage; a way he could continue talking to his student about Sufi Muslim traditions of love and tolerance and Universal God of all faiths, and at the same time continue promising my hand in marriage to my cousin Allahuddin in Baroda, even as he knew I wept in my room. (119)

Noor was most probably influenced by her mother, who came halfway to India against the wish of her Uncle Robert in 1913 and Noor also does the same to Armand. The only differentiation is her Abbajan was not captured by Hitler and Armand is captured by Hitler. After marrying Noor's father, her mother did not convert into a true Muslim, according to her uncle Dadijaan.

"Like Mother, joining rituals while privately dismissing many tenets of Islam as superstition. Dadijaan had sniffed out Mother from their very first meeting—as she could

tell Mother had never truly converted, that her Christian notions had simply acquired a new label.” (236)

Baldwin’s vision about classifying the culture or religion is deeply entrenched all through the novel. Noor believed in the meaning of secularism given by her Abbajaan. She had an opinion that all religious beliefs must be treated equally and one must respect the tradition and belief of every religion without any hatred. The distinction Noor’s Abbajaan and her uncle have in the philosophy and faith in Muslim ethics has been addressed.

All of Abbajaan’s inclusionary ideas were “non-Muslim” for Uncle. He was shocked to find Abbajaan teaching that Islam was one way but not the only way to God, shocked that Abbajaan permitted his daughters, wife and women followers to dress and “express themselves” as they felt, and to imbibe wine. While Abbajaan sought to uncover the profound layers of meaning, metaphors, and symbolism embedded within the words of the Qur’an. In contrast, his half-brother, a Qari, approached the Qur’an as a collection of sounds and directives that had only one interpretation - his own. For Abbajaan, Islam laid down unattainable ideals that everyone could aspire to; for Uncle, it was not simply a religion but an ideology from which there was no dissent, only heresy. (34)

Culture and religion are intertwined. They are like two sides of the same coin. We cannot separate the two. A lot of cultural beliefs and traditions originate from religion and vice versa. Each religion has its own set of cultural beliefs. Many works in the past have also looked at religion and culture as intertwined. People belonging to the same cultural values have different opinions about accepting other cultures and values, and Baldwin has represented this through the character of Noor’s father Abbajaan and her uncle Daddijaan. Each person has his/her own unique way in which he/she accepts culture and religion. Noor’s Abbajaan was allowing others to express themselves as per their wish and he has given the freedom to the women in his family. In contrast, her Uncle Tejuddin deliberately imposes certain rules and regulations for his convenience. The religious and cultural matters have been manipulated according to the authority’s egotistical thought processes. The cultural differences laid in between Baroda and Paris have been scrutinized and evaluated by Noor’s Abbajaan and he could accept the change for good. Abbajaan has studied the Qur’an and implement it according to the need of circumstances.

But the constraints Uncle spoke of were those of his childhood in Baroda, not Paris, and the customs he wanted to re-create were the idealized feudal life of the fifteenth century, custom no longer practiced even in India except in the courts of nawabs. By twelve, Noor had read and discussed the Qur’an enough with Abbajaan to know that restraints on women’s conduct and marriage were inventions not of Allah but of the mullahs who succeeded the prophet. And so from the age of fifteen, when Uncle arrived, Noor’s creativity, and that of Zaib, lay in finding detours around his limits. (33)

### **Issue of cultural dilemma**

Another important factor that the immigrants come across is the issue of cultural dilemma in the strange land. Since every country has different cultures and traditions and it is not easy for a person coming from another place to assimilate with different cultures. Not just culture, even language for that matter. Schumann rightly points out that the desire to become one with the host nation’s culture is important impetuses that will make people learn a language. Abha Pandey interpreted that every community carries socio-cultural belongings with it, which consists of a predefined communal identity, a set of religious thinking and practices, a framework of customs and principles for governing family. Each community’s tradition and culture are different. Every community has its tradition, food system and own language. So, to get assimilated with a different culture is not so easy; it is like plucking the tree with its roots and re-planting in another place. Culture influences the thinking of individuals. Kretch and Crutch field said that,

“There is a correspondence between the presence of certain beliefs and attitudes and schooling of the individual, the religion, socio economic status and belief and attitude of his parents, siblings, friends, teachers etc.” (76)

Shauna Singh Baldwin has properly addressed the social qualities and their significance during the time period and in foreign countries. Noor has learned the necessary virtues at the age of twelve only from her father, Abbajaan. Baldwin, through the character of Abbajaan, has portrayed the sophistic ethics of religion. Shauna Singh Baldwin's novels, *What the Body Remembers* and *The Tiger Claw*, effectively explore the themes of culture, community, and ambivalence, resulting in a unique atmosphere. In the vivid canvas of her fictional works, Baldwin weaves the aspects of Sikh and Muslim culture and presents glimpses of community life in India. Through her gripping fiction, Baldwin attempts to recreate the graphic realities of her homeland. Baldwin talks about the stretch and strain of communal politics during that time which is consistently liable for disharmony in a multicultural nation like India. Her fiction portrays the social structure of Indian culture, which rests on the pillars of caste, community, religion and gender politics, which once shaken often results in disturbing occurrences.

Shauna had also tweeted on Aug 16, 2022 stating “Our contributions reflect our hopes for India, our disappointment at its betrayal of secularism, and our faith in its people”. This tone is reflected in her works. Sutanka Ghosh Roy, in an article titled, “Re-discovering the Self: Diasporic Dimensions in the works of Shauna Singh Baldwin” points out:

The diasporic experience is defined, not by essence or purity but by their cognition of the necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity that lives with and through difference, essentially by hybridity. This concept of cultural difference is deeply rooted in the evolving concept of national communities. Our belongingness constitutes in the words of Benedict Anderson, “an imagined community”. (210)

## Conclusion

In *The Tiger Claw*, Shauna Singh Baldwin adeptly explores the complex intersection of culture and Diasporic influence, revealing a rich tapestry of emotions, identities, and histories. The novel explores diaspora, personal struggles, and the quest for belonging through its compelling characters.

Baldwin's portrayal of cultural intersections emphasises the universal human desire to connect with one's roots and the transformative effects of migration. The characters, especially the resilient and enigmatic protagonist, delve into their cultural heritage to gain self-awareness and establish a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar environment. This aligns with the overall diaspora narrative, where individuals frequently face the dual task of maintaining their cultural identity while adjusting to new surroundings.

In this novel, Baldwin explores the complex connection between memory and identity, revealing how individuals confront their past to influence their present and future. The characters explore truth, love, and self-discovery while dealing with historical memory, family secrets, and the lasting effects of traumatic events. Baldwin's exploration of these themes emphasises the significance of recognising and reconciling with history in order to establish a more comprehensive and unified diasporic identity.

Thus, *The Tiger Claw* demonstrates the enduring strength of individuals navigating the complexities of cultural diversity and diasporic influences. The novel effectively portrays the universal aspects of the human experience, such as the pursuit of connection, understanding, and a sense of belonging, despite challenging circumstances. Shauna Singh Baldwin's work prompts us to acknowledge the aesthetic and intricate outcomes resulting from this convergence, thereby significantly influencing our comprehension of culture, diaspora, and the resilient nature of the human experience.

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