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The Tiger Claw: A War against Violence and Intolerance

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Abstract:

The paper endeavours to examine Shauna Singh Baldwin's novel *The Tiger Claw*, which has Second World War as its backdrop. The article attempts to highlight Power politics, politically instigated wars and the consequences of political decisions on civil life. It highlights the importance of history in human life, as past can never be shaded as an event only, it always renders itself in the present and shapes it. The paper will also examine the theme of politics of convenience, oppression, multi-culturalism, discrimination, ethnic segregation and civilians' struggle to reinstate love and peace. The fiction shows striking similarities with the present terrified, war stricken world. The comparative study of the fiction with the current world highlights that the world is constantly anticipating peace and stability in the society but consequentially facing more horrifying and dangerous wars again and again. Ultimately the fiction under investigation is not a lamentation of World War stricken devastated civil life. On the contrary it is a powerful attempt to highlight that love and faith together can overcome violence and intolerance.

Keywords: Power politics, Diaspora, Political wars, Intolerance, Oppression.

Introduction:

The world consists of a great history of peace, love, humanitarian cultures spread across all countries. But insidiously it turned into a horrific, bloody, and inhumane technology aided more threatening wars' history of human race. The Historical novels means history of countries, cultures, primarily political history that deals with kings and monarchs, freedom fighters, their plots against rulers and conspiracies and their results. But in recent times, the study diverted to multi-cultural society and portrayal of wars spread almost in all the countries around the world. The present paper aims to study Shauna Singh Baldwin's history based novel *The Tiger Claw*. It portrays the Second World War at its backdrop. The thematic portrayal of the novel shows striking similarities with present terrified, war stricken world. It insightfully brings to light the consequences of political decisions on civil life. The author tries to highlight that the world is constantly anticipating peace and stability but resultantly facing more horrifying and dangerous wars. She emphasizes importance of history in her essay *Meeting the Bogeyman*:

... past bleeds continuously into the present tense and reaches into future perfect, reaching across boundaries of geography and culture as well.(Baldwin, 2016, p. 23)

In an interview Baldwin asserts that one's past is fraught with moral compromises and easy rationalisations about oppression and inequality, which should constantly be subjected to scrutiny to illuminate one's present. In recent times a change in expression of history is noticed as from tragic lamentation to introspective, investigative portrayal of history in the fiction. It is to research the nature of human society and the influences of other factors on history.

The selection of varied historic themes as the background of fiction by the author is not for lamentation of what happened in world wars, partition, post partition riots and post 9/11 European countries. Instead of this, it is an intuitive attempt to reveal the consequences of political decisions on civil life. The novel *The Tiger Claw* is set during the World War period and very effectively deals with the theme of power politics, oppression, multiculturalism, discrimination, ethnic segregation and love and civilians' struggle for reinstating peace. The novel opens with very meaningful evocative Epigraphs by a well-known Sufi poet Rumi :-

“Remember, even though I have done terrible things

I can still see the whole world in your face.”

Rumi (Kullujat E Shams, Quatrain 1110)

“Two hands, two feet, two eyes, good,

as it should be, but no separation

of the Friend and your loving.

Any dividing there

makes other untrue distinctions like “Jew”

and “Christian” and “Muslim””

Rumi (Kullujat E Shams, Quatrain 321)

The epigraphs perfectly express the World War torn world of the past and are equally applicable to the present world. In very few words the Sufi poet Rumi tells us that primarily, we all are human beings and love, trust, faith and humanity are our basic nature and needs. The moment we start labelling each other in any other ways based on gender, cultural, regional, religion and ancestral differences, we open doors for conflict. These bifurcations are man-made, false identity markers that threaten our peace and basic humanity. In this excellent work of fiction, the author demonstrates astonishing courage and maturity about selection of theme, language, arrangement of events and organization of thoughts. While

introducing the political turmoil and the world war period the author unwearingly introduces the protagonist, Noor Inayat Khan, as a very strong and courageous female spy. This is a well researched fictional account of a true female spy, fabricated with true and fictional events from her life.

World War II Devastation:

The introductory chapter opens in Pforzheim, Germany, one of the ill famed harassment Nazi camps. It introduces that Noor Inayat Khan of Indian ancestry is a British agent, politically isolated prisoner, in Nazi captivity. She is being tortured to get the Britisher's political and war strategic information. The second chapter introduces war shredded France through the eyes of Kabir, Noor's brother. The historians rightly point out that the World Wars mark the century with its ambitious political decisions and extreme cruelties. Kabir is a flight lieutenant who through his vision enables the readers to vicariously experience the war torn France that disturbs the mind with its striking similarities to the present world. His observations of war torn France are of dual importance as he is one of those bomber flights who have destroyed the land as invaders and afterwards he is a war victim also. He enters the invaded territory in search of his lost sister Noor and the sight of demolished land disturbs him and strikes his conscience. He depicts the land which was merely a battlefield for him in the following words:

“... Detour upon detour drove him south to Freiburg in Breisgau, a city he knew only as a target objective last November, now almost conjured out of existence by Allied bombs—his bombs. As he drove through its high canyons of scorched rubble, the sight of a tiny, ragged girl foraging alone with a wooden bucket amid a mass of crushed possessions and twisted steel brought the Al-Fatiha surash to his lips.”(TC 06)

The author proposes that the World War II is not a sudden outburst but an insidious effect of the aftermath of the World War I. Kabir observes France first as a battle field and later as a destructed civil property. He represents the mixture of emotions and expresses the emotional turbulence through his introspective comments. He belongs to Indian ancestry, spends his childhood and adolescence in peaceful France but as Nazis devour France his family flies to Europe to seek refuge. He participates in the world war to prove his loyalty to the British raj. He targets and destroys the land and civil lives to satisfy political ambitions. But when he re-enters the land as war victims' relative, he acknowledges that he had killed for the joy of flying. A sudden thought that Noor might have been injured or killed due to his bombing fills his mind with despair. Kabir experiences the power of authority during the war without knowing what destruction he was causing. As soon as the War ends and he lands on the ground, the terrible facts shake his conscience. He becomes an eye witness to the turbulence of war that had destroyed numerous families, and the same is depicted as follows:

“... he waited for the transports bringing deportees and prisoners of war home to Paris. For weeks, in deepening amazement and horror, he met trains arriving at the Gare de l'Est each morning

with hundreds upon hundreds of hollow- chested, shaven-headed returnees. Every day, at UNRRA headquarters, ..., coming to realize with ever-mounting dread that while he was looking for one woman, many were searching for entire families.”(TC, 08)

The descriptions of war torn France disturb the readers and compel them to introspect the condition of the present period. One can easily correlate the descriptions of the post World War population with the present displaced populations in the politically unstable, war facing, economically devastated countries. On the way to Munich in search of Noor, Kabir observes a group of men and women:

“A short distance further, four men and two women carrying bundles and suitcases were climbing slowly into a Red Cross lorry parked along the road, facing Kabir. These anonymous survivors of the terror, weak from their time in the camp, still wearing their sack like prison attire, were the liberated- “displaced persons,” or DPs- on their way to somewhere they once called or could now call home.” (TC,08)

It seems that the author attempts to develop a connection between the history and the present discontented spurning world showing striking similarities.

Power Politics and Youth

The investigative assessment of reasons behind such wars and brutal violence brings to notice that these are not sudden reactions to any futile reasons. On the contrary they are insidious discontent waited for a long time to erupt into planned action. The major pawns in such political conspiracies for its successful implementation are young minds, which are easy to influence and instruct as per conspirators’ will. The research on the clash of generations- youth bulges and political violence brings to light a very important aspect. It observes that young minds are very easy to influence and that is the reason why all over the world in the history and present, the active participants in the conflicts, contentions, revolutions or wars are noted as ‘youths’. The aspects such as nationalism, social change, and indignation of government, social or political atrocities happening around are easy and influential reasons to hypnotize the youth. In such cases political leaders, mentors, influential personalities play a vital role in diverting and utilizing the young power and energy. History warns that when such youths fall under wrong influences they have been the cause of great destructions such as World Wars, Partition riots, Khalistan movement in India, many terrorist activities, and in the recent period the attack on World Trade Centres are just a few of the examples implemented by youths. These events are politically charged revenge strategies that resulted in inhumane violence and left blemished memories in the history of the human race and humanity. The same string of imputation is portrayed by Shauna Singh Baldwin in her fiction. Urdal Henrik comments on ‘Youth Bulges and Political Violence’ which is as follows:

“The motive-oriented tradition, or grievance perspective, has its origins in relative deprivation theory and tends to see the eruption of

political violence as a rational means to redress economic or political grievances. Motives for committing political violence can be economic, like poverty, economic recession or inequality, or political, like lack of democracy, absence of minority representation or self-governance. Most of the literature on youth bulges and political violence falls into this tradition.” (Urdal, Henrik; 2012)

The fiction under consideration involves young protagonists and active characters who are participating in the politically charged and intrigued actions and violence. These characters are hypnotized by the thought of nationalism, social reformation, and separation ideas. Not only the fiction for research but the current world also contains large number of youth power controlled by terrorist organizations, separatist leaders, dictators, religious organizations and ill ambitious politicians. They are well versed with the nature of violence in the world and use it as a weapon to create antagonism and rigid barriers in the multiethnic societies, states or countries by violating the communal faith, peace, love and affection.

During his search operation Kabir encounters many war victims as well as Nazi soldiers and learns that in the post war times, both victims and invaders are under the same shock of fright with low health and economic conditions. At every halt, he comes across ‘hollow-faced’ men and women in ghostly state wandering for safe places and the same is the condition of German soldiers, described as follows:

“Kabir lowered the beam: half a dozen frightened faces below the forest of surrendering arms. Just boys. German soldiers moving homewards, hoping to surrender to the British or Americans...” (TC, 14)

With authority and sincerity on words and language Baldwin recreates the world war rage and fright stricken youths’ situations. She also adds that these are the blind mobs following the politicians imprudently, without thinking about the consequences of these wars, riots, attacks or any terror activities. The author raises the questions about awareness of youth:

“Did those boys realize that their suffering was the outcome of arrogance? That the battles of Paris and London, the bombing of Coventry and Dunkirk, made this necessary? Necessary. How much retaliation had really been necessary?” (TC, 14)

The quote targets the post war destroyed world to question ‘who’ is responsible for that frayed world situation. But the questions are equally applicable to the present terrorized world torn by domestic violence and frightened with the idea of an imminent third World War. She remarks that the world has yet not changed after experiencing two extreme world wars; still the retaliations are going on. While carrying the critical theme of the war torn world, the author finely intertwines the other themes such as politically torn world, racism,

identity crisis, multi-culturalism and staunch traditional conflicts arousing family patriarchal ambitions and its forced implementation. The author comments on war consequences pointing that the war does nothing better but deforms the world, violates relations, humanity, and inter-human faith. Revenge politics, territorial politics have brought barbarism back into this so called civilized world.

Migration and Refugees

Around the world territorial margins are changing so frequently that it has created a state of anarchy. The author comments on this problem as Kabir enquires about the distance of the border from the place then he gets the reply:

“Which border? Of this zone or of France? Maps change everyday.”

“Please, is there an orphanage? This child is lost.”

“My village is in Poland. Is there any Poland now?” (TC, 16)

The dialogues are equally applicable to the present unstable chaotic world. The themes the author developed on the background of World War suggests that the world has not moved towards peace ever since but is crawling towards the unimaginable worst human conditions. Along with the theme of power politics and revenge politics the author swiftly shifts towards identity politics experienced by various immigrants, such as Kabir and Noor the coloured persons. With the increasing rate of migration, there emerged other assimilatory problems such as ethnic identity, coloured identity, cultural identity, lingual identity and prominently second generation migrants' identity crisis. During the world wars, expulsion, insecurity, instability, famine and political crisis were the reasons behind huge migrations. The author skilfully fabricates the string of population displacements and anarchy through Kabir's observations:

“... A stable crowded with hollow-faced men and women ... Polish or Russian flowed between them- he couldn't tell. . . . Every inch of the church was covered by ragged travellers of all ages, kneeling, sitting, lying anywhere, everywhere, in pews, on the stone floor... Hush voices rose and fell in a dozen languages and dialects around him.”(TC, 14-15)

The author describes the prejudiced treatment of host society to the migrants and formation of discriminations on the basis of race, colour, gender, language, religion or life pattern, natural or social origin; ownership, birth and status. The author reveals a fact that a century may have passed, war or no war, peace or terrorism in any period, time change cannot change the human mind that is full of discrimination. The description is just as applicable to the present. At present the bordered world experiences the same kind of racism, discrimination on the basis of culture, language, nationality, idealism and political influence which was experienced during world wars. The author tries to put forward that ethnicity is a social construct and many times controlled by political leaders to execute their wills on civilians.

In some way the author asserts that ethnicity and its emotional power is cantered and used as per political need. Primordialists suggest that ethnic violence results from antipathies and antagonisms that are enduring properties of ethnic groups. A study of social sciences comments that political elites deliberately create antagonism in multi ethnic societies for their selfish reasons. Such a hypocritical nature of political power is discussed in the novel through Kabir's character, his views about the World War; the Britishers' stand against the Germans' and their imperialistic power execution in India. This is criticized in the novel:

“His (Kabir's) view of the war was rather different from those of his fellow officers. As a colonial, born in Britain ..., he felt Britain's historic lust for power and its rule in countries it occupied to be only slightly less virulent than Germany's, ... After the bombing of Chittagong and Calcutta, Churchill's “Rice Denial policy” and “Boat Denial policy” diverted rice from the people to war related industries; ... So Hitler caused the deaths of yet uncounted millions by his actions, Churchill by inaction ... Was there a difference, Kabir wondered, excepting opportunity and method?” (TC, 27)

The author comments on the paradoxical behaviour of British regime and raises issues that whether such politically ambitious regimes in any case should be opposed or not? Action or inaction ill-charged political will causes horrible effects that are experienced by the world many times. The present world also faces numerous politically charged, instigated problems and its consequences. The author propositions that, in this world “Survival of the fittest often means survival of the loudest, the most bumptious.” (TC, 37) While developing the theme of politics and its consequent effects on human relations, the author introduces major characters, post world war situations, surrounding, social conditions, politics of the invaders' and defenders'. The author also considers other sides of political interventions on the lives of civilians. Baldwin highlights that politics and war are the weapons of completing and establishing personal ambitions of powerful elites. In the World Wars, the British played 'politics of convenience'. Their arguments against Germans' and Indians' were contradictory, and paradoxical. The British were opposing the Germans for their dictatorship and exploitation of European resources and their racial segregation and genocides in Europe. But in India under the name of civilization and enlightenment the British were doing the same with the Indians.

Politics of convenience:

Political powers decide social stability, unity, development as well as antagonism and identity, nationality of the community or individuals'. The present world is also suffering with the problem of numerous displacements and anarchy in territorial politics and the same problem is deliberated upon in the novel with reference to the great migrations of Jews in France and Hindus' and Muslims in India. It is stated as:

“..., but Jews are all not-French. Monsieur Laval revoked the citizenship of all Israelites naturalized after 1927. Now they are just

Jews again. Émigrés.”... Wasn’t nationality a basic right? How could it be taken away?”(TC, 145)

Thus the author questions the troublesome ways of politics which deports innocent civilians for territorial dominance. She also exemplifies Britishers’ politics of convenience. The attempts to achieve freedom are labelled as resistance or terrorism as per the convenience of the regime. The author criticizes the aspects race, identity, cultural superiority commenting that the more we follow these futile purity and superiority concepts, the more we separate, and create hedges in between human beings and humanity. The author criticises that hedging, discrimination, hierarchy have become human tendency. We only need futile differences to separate one from the other; the reasons may be migration, displacement, race difference, cultural, or lingual difference; or people hating each other. In the novel, the author portrays the inflow of migrants into France, and especially how Jews were disliked and she also narrates that the hatred for Jews during the World War was a politically influenced reaction. This is a parallel drawn with the present situation emphasizing that around the world in various countries this war of politically generated hatred against various races, nationality or different identity is going on. The author states that ‘If the French didn’t have Jews to blame, they’d have chosen the Muslims.’ So the novel is not just a fictional account, but the poignant inter woven portrayal of constantly disturbing factual issues. Along with the description of misuse of political power the author also declares the need to divert hatred from human beings to the qualities to be hated. In an interrogation Noor criticises German’s revengeful attitude and answers that she does not hate Germans, but fears becoming like them. At this point the author attempts to answer the power politics with Gandhian philosophy.

Information Media and Propaganda:

The other aspect that is used as a major political weapon is the information media. The fiction proposes that the one who controls information media achieves half victory. It is used as a weapon of propaganda. The author portrays that during the World War, the Germans restricted print media from printing any news, editorials and pamphlets without scrutiny by German officers. The media is compelled to spread the news of plentiful work, good life in Germany and factual details of Nazi torture camps are deliberately kept away from civilians. Along with this description of German occupied France, the author draws parallels with British regime in India. While interrogating Noor in captivity, the Nazi commander Vogel shows her news and reports by international newspaper and Board of economic warfare reporting extremely worst situations created due to Britishers’ imperialist selfish war oriented stand. With the constant dwelling in German occupied France and British occupied India the author draws readers’ attention towards Britishers’ hypocritical defence in France and oppressive regime in India. The narration states the power of news media as it can influence, control and divert the public opinions. Apart from spreading rumours in the society, political parties use it as a weapon of propaganda and also to attack the opposition party. The author explains how print media is used to propagate regimes’ decisions as proper but it also uses its power to enlighten the civilians with truth.

War and Conscience:

The author points out that war, terrorism and power politics hypnotizes young minds. The young power which can change the world into amicable, peaceful place for living turns them into monstrous destructive creatures if they are influenced, and trailed into war. A representative character Emile is young and creative minded but the war changes his life inside out. Instead of working on creative mechanical engineering, he fights for France liberation front and plans various destructive activities. Emile states his agony:

“But now I wake up angry, go to sleep angry. I, who was going to be a great inventor- huh! You know, I have a better design for an automatic washing machine, another for an electric shaver. And what am I thinking of every day? How to destroy a plant or derail a train? It’s no way to live!”(TC, 331)

The anguish expressed by Emile is currently a universal problem. Almost every country in the world is facing domestic, international contentions and suffering from the problem of displaced refugees, expatriates and migrants on the borders of various countries waiting for the accommodation, and acceptance from other countries. The world is transformed into a chaotic habitat, unsuitable for human race. The author comments on the inhumanity spread around the world accusing ill wills of human beings, questioning whether there is any humanity left or not. During the imprisonment of German commander Vogel, Noor introspects over being human and comments as follows:

“I have this time-away-from-time to think, ma petite, think about what makes a human. It is not merely being born, or surviving, but being cherished, receiving love in enough measure that it becomes our obligation to pass it on. Love, caring- these are the true signs of life, not only flesh. The capacity to feel as others feel. To suffer, even vicariously. By this measure, you were not human.

By this measure, none of us have yet become human, for we are numb to pain that is not our own.” (TC, 368-69)

Noor represents the fighters against oppression, inhumanity and exploitation for the sake of love, peace and humanity. The author proposes that the world has become a barbaric place at present for the human race but we should live like human beings and not as multi ethnic societies trying to prove our superiority over others. By participating in the war, Noor attempts to prove to the world that, ‘ours is a love their bombs can’t shatter, that bullets can’t kill, even if they have deported my beloved.’ This is an incisive comment on the power politics, wars and terrorism pointing that these perishable human desires cannot defeat power of love, humanity and affection. The author draws readers’ attention towards present burning issue of refugees, expatriates, displaced and migrated people. The constant contentions, clashes in countries, civilizations and cultures have metamorphosed the world into a war field, a big prison, and dungeon. To quote the author:

“We all want and need to go home, Renee, not only you. But no place can be called home any more. We’re all together in an expanding prison camp, and you’ll only be home when nothing more can happen to you.” (TC, 434)

The dialogue expresses the status of life in the World War period but it is equally applicable to present war stricken terrorized world. Number of times it is questioned that with a certain event world has changed but the author believes that the world is always the same--- crimes happen, oppression is there from ancient time, wars happen from primordial time--- human beings seize for the opportunities to dismantle international laws to execute their cruel plans in practice. The political convenience grabbed the opportunity to turn into deliberate attacks on civilians. Those who oppose the oppression are named as rebels, extremists, terrorists, separatists; this is again a political hypocritical convenience to name the resistants when they work in their favour or against. The same system of defining resistance or expressing ideological differences is still in practice as clashes in ideologies and civilizations are still ongoing. The author comments on the politics of convenience in her essay *Ruthless Terrorist or Valiant Spy?*:

Was she (Noor) a terrorist or a valiant member of the resistance? It was a tromp d’oeil- if you consciously switch point of view, you see one image or the other. Not both. And like the illusion flipping in and out of view, the picture is both: Noor is a terrorist in the eyes of the Germans and a formidable member of the French resistance in the eyes of the Allies. (Baldwin, 2016, p. 44)

The author proposes that every person has his/ her own right explanations from their respective point of view. In the novel *Vogel*, Nazi commander, gives his reasons supporting Hitler that they are fighting against imperialism for free land, for their own ‘living space’ as the Indians are fighting for freedom in India. It does not mean that the author supports terrorism or Hitler’s point of view but she highlights that it is the power supremacy that decides in this world what is right and what is wrong. The author comments that world is interlinked and every action gets a reaction immediately or in the future. On the declaration of end of war, the author comments:

“No, it is only the beginning of a new phase of war.” (TC, 387)

Baldwin’s comment is true to every post war situation as experienced till date, wars never end forever but sow seeds for forth coming instabilities, umbrage/ displeasure and violence.

Conclusion:

The author chooses to focus on the experiences of South Asian Canadian Diaspora not because she belongs to that space but for the reason that the events are unpleasant memories, problems, feelings, metaphors and images which should not be relegated to the past, but should be etched on our memories that could guide us in shaping the present and the future. In support of her views S. S. Baldwin in one of her interviews says:

“Fiction writers continue to play the role we have always played -- we tell the lies that tell the truth. I find it's the paradox of my life as a writer that if I yearn for tolerance, I have to write about the effects of intolerance. To demand justice, I find I must explore injustice. And if I yearn for the return of liberal secular individualism I have to engage with and examine Fascism, Fundamentalism and other forms of group-think. That was true before 9/11/01 and remains true today.” (Lindsey, 2005)

Baldwin does not intend to preach any moral lesson to the world but her themes draw readers' attention to present burning issues and urge to think over solutions which will bring peace in the world and do not cause any more wars.

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