



EXPATRIATE AND TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN ANITA RAU BADAMI'S '*CAN YOU HEAR THE NIGHTBIRD CALL?*'



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Abstract :

Anita Rau Badami is an Indo-Canadian novelist who has authored four extraordinary novels. Her critically acclaimed novels are known for truthful depiction of Indian families and strong-minded Women. Woman victimization is one of the evils confronting women all over the world; this evil is further compounded if they are placed in unstable political societies or events. Women being extremely vulnerable are easy targets of any form of oppression, humiliation, deprivation and discrimination. Partition literature explores the sexual trauma, sufferings and painful experiences of women during and after the Partition. This in many ways substantiates the fact that inequality of sexes is neither a biological fact nor a divine mandate but a cultural construct. The paper aims to discuss the victimization of women and their traumatic experiences through the perspective of a female writer namely Anita Rau Badami in her novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* a novel on the theme of the Partition of India and Pakistan.

Keywords : Expatriation, Partition, Women, Victims, Trauma, Homelessness, Feminism

Research Paper :

Anita Rau Badami is a writer of South Asian Diaspora living in Canada with a strong voice of the modern Indian Diaspora. Her novels deal with the complexities of Indian family life and with the cultural gap that emerges when Indians move to the west. Her first novel *Tamarind Mem* deals with bittersweet nostalgia, of her Indian sensibility portraying her memories of her past days, depicting the descriptions of Indian domestic life. Her second novel *The Hero's Walk* could be the best illustration to her alien feeling which is clad in a fine garb of refinement. Badami's third novel, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call* explores the Golden Temple Massacre and the Air India Bombing is set against the back drop of Punjab Division, it is a medley of series of stories which centers around three Indian women each in search of peace, during the tumultuous scenes in Punjab both personally and politically. Woman victimization is one of the evils confronting women all over the world; this evil is further compounded if they are placed in unstable political societies or events. Women being extremely vulnerable are easy targets of any form of oppression, humiliation, deprivation and discrimination. Partition literature explores the sexual trauma, sufferings and painful experiences of women during and after the Partition. This in many ways substantiates the fact that inequality of sexes is neither a biological fact nor a divine mandate but a cultural construct. The paper aims to discuss the victimization of women and their traumatic experiences through the female perspectives. The paper brings to light how the novelist has used her protagonists to explore a 'female consciousness and value system', an aspect that is conspicuously missing in the Partition fiction of the male writers. The novel substantiates how women's writings are produced from within women's experience or from their sub-conscious. The novelist has been influential in drawing attention to the differential history of women's experiences during the Partition. The paper emphasizes how narrating the stories of women characters who experienced the migration and violence, a women novelist contains the potential to reveal the complex dispossessions which is both psychic and material. The trauma, anguish, pain and ambivalence that mark the experience of Partition have been made evident and visible. The novel is an imaginative response to the traumatic events of the Partition, portraying the great impact of the external events on the human psyche.

The Exposé of Women Victimization in the Novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird call?* is the story of three women: Bibiji, Leela and Nimmo whose roots are in India, immigrate to Canada, where series of situations lead to their catastrophic lives. Sharanjeet Kaur better known as Bibiji in

Vancouver, Leela Bhat, her neighbour from Bangalore and Nimmo, Bibiji's niece, who is orphaned by the devastation that engulfed India after the Partition, is now rebuilding her life in Delhi. The lives of all the three are once again shattered as the conflicts of the past and the present re-emerge and devastate. The Nightbird is a bird, whose songs are supposedly a portent of ill-luck. Bibiji, steals her sister Kanwar's fortune to gain entry into Canada, and she is given to luxuries at Canada, her sister Kanwar is left behind to face the rapidly changing political crisis of partition, of India and Pakistan in 1947. In the meanwhile, she disappears making Bibiji penitent and guilty all through her life. Kanwar's daughter at last makes her life happy by marrying and saving her own life from the clutches of orphanage. She establishes her own family skillfully. Badami's technique in sketching the Indian scenario and her skill in knitting the plot so as to make the ambitious reap the consequence is special to her. Bibiji believes that it was a punishment for having stolen her sister's fortune. Finally, she composes herself and utilizes all her energies in establishing a restaurant called 'Delhi Junction'. This restaurant becomes the place where members of the growing Vancouver Indo Canadian stream come to discuss & dispute their ideas, probably Badami made use of one such meeting place where the Indo-Canadian stream of writers meet in reality in her works of fiction. This might be an attempt to ravish the ambitious women who even 'stoops to conquer'. Though Bibiji was penitent for her misdemeanor, she never redeems herself, when given a chance she again deceitfully adopts her niece's eldest son Jasbeer, and brings him to Canada as she doesn't have a heir. Jasbeer, who is a resentful Youngman, finds solace in Paji's stories that made him bound to his Sikh ancestry. Finally, rebellious Jasbeer becomes a Sikh extremist striving for separate Sikh Home land. Her third woman Leela Butt was suffering from her in-between Identity, as her mother was a German who married a Hindu. Leela's mother was an out-caste when her mother passes away, she happens to marry a Hindu Brahmin. Thereby gains an access to get away from her in-between position. Badami's Roots in India made her observe the orthodox community set up in those days, which are reflected in all her novels. She raises her voice against this communal set up and tries to give a broad prospective to this narrow outlook. She had tried to strike a balance between the pros and cons of Indian life and her conflict to acclimatize her ways between East and West. The novel tries to explore the nature of works in those days when the growing desi community is flourishing in Vancouver, and the increasingly tumultuous political scene at Punjab and Delhi, where Hindus and Sikhs are at conflict. Fatal twist in the Plot is that Bibiji and Paji were taking

their annual pilgrimage to the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the holiest of Sikh Shrines. While they were inside the Temple, the Shrine was stormed by Indian air force aiming at Sikh extremists who were taking the refuge in the temple compound in June 1984; the consequences were devastating, as Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh Bodyguards, as an act of vendetta for her assault on the Temple, which in turn created a whirl in this normal course of Sikh follower's life. The violence flooded India and over flowed to Canada, and into the lives of these three women. This novel tries to unfold the ease of Badami's in weaving the personal and political life together, and takes the reader from dream to realism of terrorism and religious intolerance. The Calgary Herald complimented Badami for her "enduring style which explored the 'In-between' state that is part of both immigrant life in Canada and Sikh life in post-partition India is equally rich in the complex joy of struggle and the possibility for tension, misunderstanding and sometimes violence". The work gained her critical acclaim despite its shortness and jumping of plot skipping years between 1980 and 1984. Badami's licentiousness could be approved as she never let her plot loose. The novel presents characters who are victims of the earlier mentioned historical incidents. In the Komagata Maru incident, the victim is Harjot Singh, Bib-ji's father. He desperately wanted to go abroad in search of wealth. Unfortunately, the Japanese ship Komagata Maru. Carrying several passengers like him on the lookout for good jobs was forced to retreat from the shores of Canada. Of the 340 Sikhs, many on board were shot dead, others who were lucky to live, had this act of humiliation pinned to their hearts for the rest of their lives. Disappointed with life and luck, Harjot Singh resigns himself to his cot all day and all night, finally the poor man walks away and his whereabouts are unknown to the family. The second historical Badami talks about is the partition of the country. The pitiable victim of partition in the novel is Nirmaljeet Kaur, the niece of Bib-ji. The traumatizing effect violence leaves on Nimmo is movingly portrayed in the novel. Nimmo's father, mother and two brothers face violent deaths in the communal riots that arouse during India's partition. Nimmo carries the wound fresh in her heart and her tragic childhood makes her a frightened woman for the rest of her life. Partition became "...not the celebration of nationality but the negation of humanity but the negation of humanity, religion and morality." (Agarwal, Beena 117). Problems on sharing territories between the two newly formed nations, India and Pakistan, build anger and hatred everywhere. Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus fight with each other, there is so much blood lost and the affected people are in shock knowing not what awaited them

the next day, the next minute. The author rightly says, "...hate is like an infectious disease, it can become a plague very soon if something is not done to stop it" (Nightbird, 50). Bib-ji waits for long to receive news from her family, but when no letter arrives, she goes back to India in search of her sister and her family. She finds out that her whole village is swept out of the maps; Dauri Kalan vanishes out of existence. The loss of her sister's family develops in Bib-ji, a hatred for the scent of lavender, the very fragrance with which she fell in love as a little girl and for which she stole her sister's life to go to the land, which offered her soaps, perfumes, and a rich comfortable life. Rajender Kaur says, "The lavender soap, thus jostled across a number of different emotional and historical registers, becomes a tangible symbol of aspiration, desire, wealth, and opportunity on the one hand and of violence, death and traumatic memory on the other." (280) Thus Bib-ji predicament reveals that, "The Sikh minority in a state of expatriation suffers a great loss for their being uprooted in their own homeland than the burden of apathy and dislocation in the land of their adoption." (Agarwal, Beena 112). The third incident is the storming of The Golden Temple in Amritsar by the Indian military troops under the orders of the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Mrs. Gandhi is disliked for many reasons by the Sikhs: for creating Haryana out of Punjab, for planning to give Chandigarh for Haryana, for giving away Punjab's river water to Rajasthan and the list of grudges goes on. Indira Gandhi's declaration of emergency shocks the immigrants, they are surprised by her arrogant and 'extremely rash decision'. Pa-ji always distances himself from all kinds of arguments based on his native country. "Pa-ji wouldn't deny that he was fond of India, that it was part of his being and was where his memories often turned. But history was a picture hanging on a wall, something of the past to spur the imagination, to write books about. I wouldn't do to let it swallow you whole." (Nightbird, 267) says Pa-ji to the disturbed Indian immigrant population who discuss emergency. Declaration of Emergency makes people view Indira Gandhi as a bossy, despicable woman. Angry citizens of the country, revolt against the system, join in protest marches. Sunny, Nimmo's relative says with much annoyance, "This is a democratic country, not some banana republic with an Idi Amin at the head of it, shooting anyone who disagrees with him!" (Nightbird, 273).

In this sense, one can assert that 1947 alone was not the year of the Partition. It was in fact only the beginning of the Partition in India. All the events and incidents of communal hatred and violence and terrorism that India has been witnessing since 1947, can be traced to the Partition of

India. Hence, Partition cannot be viewed as a single event of 1947 but as one which has cast its sinister shadow on the future as well. The novel reaches a devastating culmination when the external political disturbances and conflicts erupt and destroy the lives of these three women. The army is ordered into the Golden Temple, the holiest of Sikh's shrine, under the Prime Ministership of Mrs. Gandhi. The resulting destruction leads to the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi by two of her Sikh bodyguards, which in turn triggers revenge killings of innocent Sikhs. Less than a year later, Air India Flight 182, en route from Canada to India, explodes off the coast of Ireland, killing all 329 people on board. Two Canadian Sikhs were charged with sabotage. The News Headline in The Globe and Mail (Canada), March 16, 2005 read: "Vancouver: In a stunning conclusion to a case that spanned 20 years, two Canadians were not guilty on first degree murder charges in the bombing of Air-India Flight 182 that killed 329 people"--- "New Delhi: More than two decades later, the Justice Nanavati Commission report has revealed that only one police official.... was convicted in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in which more than 3,000 Sikhs were killed in Delhi alone.... Interestingly, cases against 14 police officials could not be proceeded with as "files were untraced". Besides these, in cases against two officers "no charge sheet was filed" due to lack of evidence. Five others were "acquitted". This escalation of violence in India reverberates in the Indo-Canadian community, pushing all the three otherwise resilient protagonists to disaster. Pa-ji is shot dead at the Golden temple in an attack by the Army leaving Bibiji thoroughly confounded and shattered. Nimmo's husband, her son and daughter are all slaughtered in the violence transforming her into a living corpse and Leela Bhatt was one of the passengers on board of the ill-fated Air-India Flight 182, hoping to visit her home for the first time after 18 years since her arrival to Canada. This is one novel where women are in the front and centre of the struggles, transforming hardship and pain into power. In Badami's experience, women never talk about getting back home. Instead they are focused on keeping their children safe, cooking their family's next meal, and picking up the pieces of their lives. She strongly believes that women are resilient by their very basic nature. The three protagonists in the novel are inspired by a collection of survivor's testimonies published by People's Union for Democratic Rights/ People's Union for Civil Liberties in 1984 about the impact of the Delhi riots. One experiences these events through the lives, thoughts and understandings of these characters who endure the trauma of devastation. This is what can be perfectly called as a novel

of women victimization. The novels bring home the impact of political and communal violence with immediacy and power that newscast and history records cannot.

The novel that covers the times of turbulence from the Partition to the assassination of the late Prime Minister Mrs. Gandhi stands as the strongest evidence and conformation to the argument that whatever may be the cause, whoever may be the perpetrators the fact remains that it is always the woman who is on the receiving end of violence. The trauma and the ordeal of the victimization in case of these characters can be discussed individually as each one of them underwent the suffering in their own ways: either themselves succumbing to the violence physically or becoming psychological victims upon losing their loved ones. Bibiji is the most vivacious, colourful and dominant figure in the story. Nimmo found herself adopted by the Sikh couple who had rescued her in the kafeela. She was eighteen when she married Satpal. Mother of three children now, Nimmo found herself settled into an uneventful existence. Yet the chalky taste of fear that had clogged her throat since her mother had thrust her into the wheat bin remained with her even now, when she was a grown woman with a family of her own. Nimmo, Bibiji's niece, daughter of her sister Kanwar, can be seen as a psychological victim of first the Partition as a child and an adult victim in the riots of 1982. She was orphaned in the Violence of 1947 and lives perpetually haunted by the dark memories of her mother being raped and then committing suicide. Sometimes when she heard water running at night, she was reminded of her mother's furious washing, and her nostrils would fill with the smell of the pale violet soap...her fear was monstrous, silent thing that often woke her, sweating and shaking, from troubled sleep. It made her suspicious of everyone, even neighbours...how could she explain what it was like to have your life pulled out from under your feet, to wake up one day and find you have no family or home in the land your people had tilled for a hundred years?..... And as much as she tried, Nimmo could not rid herself of the memory of a pair of feet dangling above a dusty floor, their clean pink soles smelling delicately of lavender soap." (p.158-59). Ironically the past re-emerges during the riots of 1984 when she hides her daughter in the same way as her mother had hid her, but still fails to save her life. Quite incidentally, Nimmo too like Bibiji had always been an ardent admirer of Mrs. Gandhi and always defended her whenever Satpal voiced his dissatisfaction of Mrs. Gandhi's political moves and motives. In 1971, when she won the general elections with a sweeping majority it was also the year of Bangladesh declaring itself independent, with millions of refugees from East Pakistan crossing over to India. The animosity

that had been simmering between East and West Pakistan exploded into an all-out war. “Indira Gandhi is ordering Pakistan to stop massacring its citizens,” Satpal said. “Why is she poking her long nose into other’s peoples’ affairs?” (p.238-39). “She is doing the right thing, our Indira-ji,” said Nimmo staunchly..... “I am beginning to think that you don’t like her because she is a woman!...I like Indira ji, she is smart and she gives woman courage. If we have a daughter, I want her to grow up into an Indira Gandhi.” “War must be good for your Madam Gandhi’s image,” he said. “But for people like you and me it is always bad.” (p.239) soon his fears, about the rumours of the war became a fact. The country was at war. People fearfully discussed what would be the third war with their neighbour in the twenty four years since Partition. But Nimmo loved Mrs. Gandhi for her stubborn strength.....and for the sense that she gave to women across the country that if she could survive so could they. Satpal says about Indira Gandhi, “people are getting there...she takes away our river water and gives it to Rajasthan, she cuts up Punjab and creates a Harayana for the Hindus, and now she is planning to give them Chandigarh as well. That city belongs to Punjab. First it was Partition and half our land disappeared...how much more are we supposed to give away? Without Punjab this country would be starving, and look how we are treated---like step-children! Is it fair?” (p.220). This was a country of excesses, and “Nimmo was determined not to be a victim ever again.” (p.225). But the unrest and discontent among the Sikhs was gaining power like whirlwind enveloping this minority community from India to Vancouver. “The Sikhs have been betrayed... first by the British who stole Punjab....then by the Congress Brahmins, who gave the Mussalmans their Pakistan and Hindus their India but left the Sikhs to die like flies in between; then by Nehru, with the rose in his jacket, and his cunning words, who tore our hearts in half by making our Punjab a bi-lingual state. And now we have been cheated again by that Brahman’s daughter who takes the wheat that we grow....think what we Sikhs have got in return for all this....are we going to let the Brahman’s daughter bleed us to death?.....what we Sikhs must do is press for separation....we demand that the government of India return our Punjab to us, whole and undivided....we demand Khalistan, a land for the Sikhs, the pure and the brave....a country of our own in return of all that has been taken from us in the past hundred years...”(p.252-53). Thus the policies of the Congress party and government create an ill-will in the Sikhs. When emergency was declared in 1975, it only added to the displeasure especially of the Sikhs: “its because of the emergency....we have been deprived of all our rights, we can be thrown in jail and kept there

forever if it pleases Madam Gandhi..... Thousands in jail! For thinking, for disagreeing with what Madam has done to this country....” (p.268-69). Nimmo shivered. She found it difficult to believe that the woman she so admired, and for whom she had voted in two elections, should impose such a thing as this Emergency without good reason. The country must be in danger she thought. How quickly fear had sneaked into their small, peaceful world, Nimmo thought. How fragile is her safety.” (p.275) “Was the situation of the Sikhs in India so wretched? Could yet another division of the country heal the wounds that had been caused by the first one?” (p.292). The wounds that were caused by the Partition still fester and give rise to fresh suspicions. The massacre and armed attack on the holy shrine of “the Golden Temple” intensified the dislike of the Sikhs for the government and lead to the most shocking and horrifying incident of the decade; the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. The retribution was achieved. This in turn triggered off the most savage rampage of Sikh massacre ever known. Nimmo stayed awake all night expecting violence to erupt out of the darkness. She could sense lurking it out there. She prepared herself to protect her daughter. The memories of the past, of the grain bharoli came flashing back. She locked her daughter in the steel almirah.. “It was the last safe place in the world that bin of grain...stay there my daughter... or they will get you.” (p.361). She saw a spire of smoke emerge. Choked by dread, she ran back inside and saw that the man had put the whole room on fire. A strong smell of kerosene filled the room and in the centre of the fire stood the steel cupboard. Nimmo heard herself screaming. Screaming all the time, she raced to and fro but the fire wouldn’t die down. She frantically searched for the keys only to realize that the men had stolen the keys. The fire engulfed the almirah with her daughter shouting from inside. The flames leapt making everything blood-red and smoke-black. Her son Pappu, who had left for the shop that morning, was also brutally burned alive and Satpal who was out of Delhi at the time met the same fate: “silently Satpal uncoiled his hair and waited trembling to see what further indignities they would inflict on him before they killed him. He wished he had the time to phone Nimmo once again. He thought of her as he had last seen her, standing in the sunlight; leaning against the door of their home.....he knelt while one of the men poured kerosene over his head, the acrid smell making him dizzy and nauseous. One man dropped a car tire over his head and jammed it about his shoulders, immobilizing his arms. Another lit a match to his streaming hair, wet with kerosene. The flames into his scalp, crept like a dreadful river down his face, licked at his eyebrows, his eyelashes. The heat burned his eyes and his last

thought was that he could not even weep. He could not even weep.” (p.371) Nimmo is transformed into a living corpse, falling into the deep abyss of senselessness. She is Nirmaljeet Kaur- “A woman damaged in places too private to see.” (p.399). Thus, the novel has a gory ending. The portrayal of strong, intelligent women endeavoring to make their lives meaningful despite the cultural and political upheavals is the most praiseworthy aspect of the novel. This is something that is largely absent and omitted in the novels of male writers of the Partition fiction. This novel is a substantial addition to the genre of Partition fiction that fills this vacuum, that is; a woman’s experience of the Partition. The novel does not merely concentrate on the violence on women during Partition but its aftermath as well, encompassing the violence that was initiated with the Partition and continued till the assassination of Mrs Gandhi. The massacre of Sikhs on the streets of Delhi and other cities and towns of Northern India in 1984 was as if “it was like Partition all over again”. The Indian immigrants look at India as their home, but because of turbulence like partition, they become homeless. Homelessness leads to identity crisis, strain in homing/ unhoming processes. The novel emphasizes the whenever the condition of the society is weak or turbulent, it is the women who suffer the most. It depicts how women, being extremely vulnerable, are easy targets of any form of oppression, humiliation, deprivation and discrimination. The note of human love is not an end but it is a beginning to an end and the process will continue till human beings live on this earth. Thus, the expatriate and traumatic experiences of women are found throughout the novel and Badami as a novelist has successfully intertwined history with story.

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