



Revisiting The Past : Diasporic Dilemma In Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear The Nightbird Call* ? And Sorayya Khan's *Five Queen's Road*

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ABSTRACT

History is a dialogue between the present and the past. The present paper deals with *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call* by Anita Rau Badami, a writer of Indian origin based in Montreal, Canada and *Five Queen's Road* by Sorayya Khan, a writer of Pakistani origin settled in Ithaca, U.S. who root their works in their experiences and their memories of socio-political upheavals in India and Pakistan and the way their in-between position influence their views of their homeland and its history. Khan weaves together the post-partition history of the Indian subcontinent by amalgamating oral testimonies and research as well as official histories to portray the different ways in which the past is remembered by the people. Badami, on the other hand, believes that she couldn't have written a novel if she had not left India and she read a collection of testimonies given by victims and read interviews published in India by people involved in extremist activities in the Punjab. The history of all countries show that violence is a universal phenomenon and it is writ large on the pages of human history. In *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call*?, Badami begins the narrative with the Partition, ropes in the Indo-Pak wars, Mrs. Gandhi taking up the reins of the country, massacre of the Sikhs etc. whereas *Five Queen's Road* epitomizes undivided India and later deals with the cataclysmic Partition in 1947 which brought in its wake humongous violence. The engagement with the homeland, the process of rehabilitation and the values that hold human beings rooted in the past are some dominant concerns in the fiction of Anita Rau Badami and Sorayya Khan.

Keywords : Homeland; post-partition history; humongous violence; rehabilitation.

DISCUSSION

Diaspora does not have nomadic existence in that though it suggests a movement from one place to another, and then, perhaps, yet another it always carries the memory of the original homeland. The word 'diaspora' often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diaspora is also understood as a site of hope, of new beginnings.

The literature of the Indian diaspora is that body of writing produced in English by people who identify themselves as being of Indian heritage living outside their own land. According to Sushma J. Varma and Radhika Seshan in *Fractured Identity*, diasporic studies are only about two decades old for such studies mainly began in the 1980s with increased globalization. Though Indian diasporic literature has been in the limelight for some time now, it is in the past twenty years or so, that it has been recognized as a body of literature, a distinct stream of literature that wants to be identified as "Indian" as well as "global".

In order to understand diasporic identity the concept of diaspora is approached as a theme in literary representations, while probing into displacement and cultural dislocation. Diasporic people as individuals with different identities continuously search for their homes they have left behind. The diasporic experience as reflected in literature not only includes issues of identity and alienation that are often talked about but also the aspect of community formation in a new land based on similar language and regional backgrounds.

Most of the writings of Indian diasporic women attempt neither to fight male domination nor to compromise themselves. But they portray the reality of what we call "femaleness"— marriage, sex, children, culture and the socially acceptable position of being a woman. It is not only the present era but the creation alone concedes man to be the superior person in the family and his wife to be his subordinate.

Identity depends on the sense of displacement, loss of home, longing to return, culture, ethnic consciousness, religion, caste groups, language, territoriality, etc. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee, Kalasapudi Vasundhara, Chimata Kamala, Puccha Annapurna, Nidadhavolu Malathi and many more write about issues like arranged marriage, cultural shocks, racial discrimination, identity crisis etc.

The first-generation of immigrants as a diasporic community is evidently different from the second and the subsequent ones. For the first generation, diaspora means strong feeling about the country of their origin, and for the second generation, it means ties with the homeland that get gradually replaced by those with the accepted country because the latter does not remain adopted. It becomes their country, yet not quite. The individuals and families who live at the juncture between two cultures can lay claim belonging to both. Yet for reasons of being born into one culture and living in the second. they are

marginal people, very different from the norms set by the majority. Marginality leads to the psychological conflicts of a divided self.

The concept of identity is very important for the diasporic people. Indian immigrants speak different languages and have different professions and vocations but what gives them a commonality of identity is the consciousness of their Indian origin, cultural heritage and a deep attachment to India. According to Indian tradition, the families live together and stick together, so that people can help one another. In the novel, Badami narrates the saga of three women - Sharanjeet Kaur, Leela Bhatt and Nimmo. They are connected through their experiences of violent events like the partition of India in 1947, the murder of Indira Gandhi followed by anti-sikh riots in 1984, the radical Sikh Separatist Movement for Khalistan and the bombing of the Air India flight in 1985 that took the lives of 22 Indian nationals and 280 Canadian citizens, form the backdrop of this novel. The distress, anguish, pain and ambivalence that mark the experience of partition have been made evident and visible in the novel and narrates the stories of women's experience during the partition.

The novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* is one of her recognised novels. Her novel *Tamarind Mem* deals with bittersweet homesickness, of her Indian sensibility portraying her memories of her past days, depicting the description of Indian domestic life. Her second novel *The Hero's Walk* could be the best example of her alien feeling which is clad in a fine garb of refinement. Badami's novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* discovers the Golden Temple massacre and the Air India Bombing, "it is a medley of series of stories which centres around three Indian women each in search of peace during the tumultuous scenes in Punjab both personally and politically." (www. epitome journals. com) The novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* is written by Anita Rau Badami in memory of the man on the bridge in Modinagar and victim of Air India flight 182. Two incidents that occurred in India between November 1984 and July 1985 inspired Badami to write this novel.

The title *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* is quite significant because it alludes to the undertones of violence in the novel, recalls the ghost story of a four-winged nightbird whose song made people go mad and ultimately die. Here the image of the four-winged bird also suggests something unnatural and abnormal. The singing night bird is the harbinger of death in the ghost story; it heralds violence into the lives of people. Badami has chosen the title as a question in the form of phrase because darkness hovers over the lives of each of the main characters in the book. However, Nimmo is the only one who perpetually lives in fear while neither Bibiji nor Leela have any presentiments of death or danger.

Sharanjit Kaur, a six-year-old girl, lived with her parents Harjot Singh, Gurpreet Kaur and her elder sister Kanwar in a village called Panjaur. She always dreamt of a better life and thus became so much fascinated towards the things, her friend Jeeti possessed, sent by her father from Canada. She wanted to spend a luxurious life with all comfort. Badami has portrayed the differences between both the sisters in terms of beauty and behaviour. Sharan was very pretty and charming while Kanwar was

“as plain as mud.” (20). Sharan was “born greedy” (21) as her mother says sometimes but Kanwar uncomplaining and caring. Kanwar was unmarried till the age of twenty-four that bothered her mother excessively. Burdened with the responsibility of two daughters and their marriages she became so irate when Sharan showed her face to the person who came to see her sister and wanted 16-year-old Sharan instead. Sharan feels, “was it her fault that Kanwar was without charm?”(21) Her extreme greediness was observed when she stole her own sister’s fate showing half face to the one-eyed man, who came to meet Kanwar for marriage negotiation. He was a man who was orphan and was brought up by relatives and now lived in Canada. The only fault in him was his blindness in one eye. Sharan felt envious as the proposal was for Kanwar, not for her. And it was the country that “Sharan had dreamed about ever since she could remember.” (27) And ultimately, despite being warned and threatened, she did what she had decided, even though she knew that she was wrong, she loved her sister.

As a consequence, Khushwant Singh blurted out that he wanted to marry the girl who was at the window. Khushwant Singh was sorry for his behaviour and begged Gurpreet's forgiveness for hurting Kanwar and kept another proposal for Kanwar with his widower cousin with a young son and a few acres of land in a nearby village. After the two months both the girls were married. Soon after marriage Khushwant Singh returned to Canada and Kanwar moved to Dauri Kalan, her husband's village. Sharan stayed back in Panjaur. Khushwant Singh used to write her letters and later suggested her to learn English ways so that she could adjust herself in Canada. Very soon she migrated to Canada while Kanwar stayed with her husband in the village to be brutally murdered during the communal riots taken place during the partition of India. In Canada, Sharanjit carved a niche for herself. She became a successful woman and was able to afford the luxuries of life.

Even though she was leading a luxurious life in Canada, she was never able to quell her nostalgia for her native land. The memories of her past made her a victim to the crisis of belonging and most of the decisions she took in her life. Even though she was leading a luxurious life in Canada, she was never able to quell her nostalgia for her native land. The memories of her past make her a victim to the crisis of belonging and most of the decisions she took in her life. She felt frustrated and dissatisfied with her life because of her betrayal to her sister. She believed that her childlessness was a punishment for stealing the good fortune intended for her sister.

The partition also affected the lives of people living in other countries. They heard the news of the beatings, rapes and killings occurring in the villages near borders. The novel has described instances of three women who have faced violence, destruction and racial discrimination. The patriarchal violence with its roots in racism has been brought to the light through the description of the character of Leela Bhatt. Badami has introduced her, “there are those who called Leela Bhat a snob, a difficult woman, with too great sense of her worth in the world. (73)

Badami has depicted the theme of racist discrimination in the novel through the love affair of a German woman called Roza Schweers and a South Indian Hari Shastri. Hari Shastri fell in love with

Roza in London and married her, “a casteless German of no unknown family?”(77) Hari's family could not accept her as they were firm believers of Hindu culture and believed that he had done an act of immorality by marrying a “casteless” woman who followed a different religion. In the beginning, she opposed and fought for her rights but later accepted defeat due to constant discrimination by in-laws and lack of support from her husband. Her mother-in-law mutters out loud, “Half breed”, “Worse than an untouchable. At least a toilet cleaner has caste. But this girl, where does she belong? Tell me, somebody, where?”(82)

The discrimination she faced was based on her colour, religion, her way of living etc. She created her own world of misery and unhappiness and confined herself in it. And ultimately got freedom by her death only. Leela was given a nickname "half and half", by her grandmother due to her mixed racial background. Her cousins used to taunt her to make her realise that she was destined to keep "hovering on the suburbs of their family's circle of love."(75) Leela lived her further life in guilt as she assumed herself responsible for the death of her mother. A deep sense of inferiority and the power-driven ideology matured her at a very early age, and very cleverly, she took charge of her father's life and his money. Then she was married to Balachandra Bhatt, fondly known as Balu. He was intrigued and charmed by Leela's unusual combination of grey eyes in a brown face. He belonged to "Kunjoor Bhatt family."(99) She was blessed with two kids—Arjun and Preeti. She wanted to establish herself as a whole entity. She refused the proposal of her husband to go to Canada due to her fear of being marginalised. Leela stared at him as if he had lost his mind." Canada? Why?"(97) But Balu was adamant about his decision and left Bangalore and reached Canada and there joined a college as a lecturer. Leela, too, along with the children Arjun and Preeti left for Canada. Having reached there, she was introduced to many people of Indian origin like Bibi-ji, Pa-ji, Colonel Samuel Hunt, Doctor Alok Majumdar, Lalu et al.

Nimmo is the third central woman character in the novel. Anita Rau Badami's description of violence during the partition and 1984 riot revolves around the story of Nimmo and her mother. Nimmo was adopted by the Sikh couple, who had rescued her in the kafila and was married to Satpal at the age of 18 in Delhi. She was the mother of three children- Jasbeer, Pappu and her daughter Kamal. Despite living a normal life, she was always haunted by her past memories. She remembered the violence of 1947, his father's and brothers' departure from home, her mother's hanging body after being raped:

Since time immemorial, rape has been prominent seemingly inevitable-feature of war, a conscious process of maximizing intimidation in a conquered people. Perhaps men on both sides thought this to be the best way to punish and humiliate like Draupadi. Violation of a woman's body became an expression of the triumph and intimidation of one community over another. Defilement of communal honour through the violence of female sexuality was the general belief that reverberated through the entire process of Partition and nation-building. The notion of honour governed specifically by patriarchal values made women the symbols of the male honour. (Malik,46)

Badami gave a heart-rendering description of Nimmo's plight. She can be seen as a psychological victim of the partition. Badami had captured the victimization skillfully that creates fear in the minds of the readers.

Nimmo's mother hanged herself due to shame and fear. The molested women were made to realise that it was not only the matter of the individual sanctity rather impurity of the entire community and thus,

they were intimidated by the impending fate and acquiesced due to the 'shame - fear -dishonour -rejection' syndrome. Their conditioning was such that they were made to believe that actual death was preferable to that in life in the form of rape, conversion and forced marriage. The latter would lead to a life full of disgrace and humiliation, whereas the former would on them honour and martyrdom. (47)

Kanwar's condition can be compared with Kusum of *What the Body Remembers* by Shauna Singh Baldwin, who could not endure the possibility of the "seeds of that foreign religion... being planted in... her womb". Revathi Bua was right- Papaji thinks that for good-good women, death should be preferable to dishonour."(587) So, Kusum went into mama's room, "turned her back, took off her chunni to bare her neck" (587), and with just one stroke, her head rolled down. Similarly, in the novel *Ashes and Petals*, H.S. Gill has portrayed the same state of mind of a fourteen-year-old girl, Baljeeto.

Sharan was a childless woman. She felt alienated from the outer world. She was sad and desperate. She asked Nimmo to take one of her sons to Canada, where he will get all the opportunities and education. Nimmo could not refuse and agreed in return for the monetary help. In Canada, Jasbeer felt like an alien and a victim at the hands of his family. The decision taken by Nimmo and Satpal proves to be disastrous for everyone. Jasbeer broke his relationship with his parents and could not mingle himself in a new family. And thus, Sharanjit could not get the satisfaction of being a mother. Nimmo loses her contact with Jasbeer. Here, Badami has presented the violence which explains the sense of being uprooted. He pleaded Nimmo and cried, "Don't send me away, please, mummy, please, I promise I will be a good boy. I won't fight with Pappu". (187)

Sorayya Khan's *Five Queen's Road* is a multi layered novel. In the novel, the intricate, complex relationships between the characters reflect that of nations and also explore notions of belonging and nationhood as well as the adaptation, migration and mutation, following the violence and political upheavals of the 1940's. Dina Lal who belongs to Lahore refuses to leave staying, put in five queens road, a house he bought. In the novel to insulate his family from the mayhem on the states, Dina Lal converts to Islam and as added protection invites Amir Shah, a muslim colleague, and his children Javid and Rubina to share the house with him. But the events that unfold over the next few months make a mockery of Dina Lal's plans. While Dina Lal and Amir Shah cross swords with each other at every given opportunity, though unexpectedly and in spite of themselves rushing to the other's defence in movements of crisis, a furtive friendship blossoms between Dina Lal and Javid. Inexplicably, the lines of the house are redrawn, and the new border is no less arbitrary and contentious that the one that sundered the subcontinent. While the house is steadily encroached upon by a car shop settlement and a sweepers'

colony, the occupants' long-standing feud reaches new heights. But the family sees an unexpected alliance develop and loyalties, to person and nation, are scrutinized. Ten years later Irene, Javid's European wife joins him. The whole house was busy preparing for her arrival. The writer has described very graphically the emergence of Irene, from the Airport :

Irene emerged from the door and dissolved into the pale background of the monstrous jet at Lahore's airport. She wore a white chiffon sari, and Rubina noticed she was the only passenger to arrive on the steps in a bewildered motion that had her reaching for a railing before it was within her grasp. (28)

She was pulled from person to person in a moving parade that left her breathless, Irene wrote to her mother about Lahore. Javid, too accompanied Irene to several places. He was interested in teaching her also he took her to "Ferozesons on Mall Road, the one booming English bookstore in Lahore, where books were laid out like spices on tables by colour and weight..."(66)

In the meantime Rubina, Javid's sister and Zafar were blessed with a baby. She was so happy "as according to her girls didn't travel as far or as wide as boys did. Her daughter would forever stay with her, long after Zafar receded into further uselessness and her own body withered under the daily responsibilities of daughter, wife and now, mother". (70) Very soon Irene was accepted as a member of the family; she no longer remained an outsider. The writer has talked about the quarrel between Amir Shah and Dina Lal. Amir Shah took every care of Irene. She, too revealed to him "stories of her family, her grandparents' travels and how they had wanted to travel to India after visiting Iran, but had been advised not to because the late monsoons had ravaged the harbours". (110) She said, "it was not only our country they occupied, they occupied our minds". (111)

Irene was in family way. And when Javid confided to her that the entire year of a job search had passed fruitlessly and that the only hope was for them to return to Eurpoe, she was least interested in the proposal. But months later, he moved to Winston Salem, North Caroline. During his stay over there he gave as many tuitions, as he could. There he came in contact with the Sterlings, an older couple who owned a significant share in a successful tobacco company. Very soon she became the mother of a boy :

Exhausted by months of countless night-time feeds, she fell into a deep sleep... when Javid awoke to see both of them bathed in the soft morning light pouring through the tall dining room window, the sight of his beautiful wife and extraordinarily chubby-kneed baby took his breath away. (157)

Later, when she read the news of Five Queen's Road in Rubina's letter, she considered the absurd notion she had been responsible for the climatory.

Thus we find that both the writers – Anita Rau Badami and Sorayya Khan in their novels *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call* and *Five Queen's Road* respectively have depicted varied diasporic experiences. In both the novels the characters have suffered pangs of their diasporic journey. Though both the writers have portrayed diasporic dilemma within the characters – sense of nostalgia, displacement, aloofness, separation etc. their treatment is quite different. Badami on the one hand begins the narrative with the Partition, ropes in the Indo-Pak wars, Mrs. Gandhi taking up the reins of the country, massacre of the Sikhs etc. whereas Sorayya Khan's epitomizes undivided India and later deals

with the cataclysmic Partition in 1947 which brought in its wake humongous violence. However, the engagement with the homeland, the process of rehabilitation and the values that hold human beings rooted in the past are some dominant concerns in both the writers.

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