

ISSN : 2395-4132

THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal



Impact Factor 6.4

Vol. 9 Issue 1 February 2023

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : editor@expressionjournal.com

www.expressionjournal.com



CULTURAL ALIENATION AND DISCRIMINATION AS PICTURIZED BY ANITA RAU BADAMI IN HER NOVEL *CAN YOU HEAR THE NIGHTBIRD CALL?* : A BRIEF ANALYSIS

DR. N. KAUSHI REDDY, (MA, MPhil, PHD)
Assistant Professor, Department of English
Kristu Jayanti College
Bengaluru, Karnataka

.....

Abstract

Migrating to other countries remains the dream of many people but sometimes, migration may give them an unexpected shock also. This novel chronicles the life and experiences of three women—Bibi-Ji, Leela and Nemmo in Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* These three women face the traumatic phase and experience love as well in their life. The novel also narrates the hazards of migrating to another country where their entry is also denied and their dreams are shattered badly. This paper aims at projecting Anita Rau Badami as one of the newest writers in the vibrant field of Indian diasporic Literature, whose novels like *Tamarind Mem*, *The Hero's Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* do beautifully expose the cross-culture that immigrants face when they move from one place to another and to show how Badami belongs to the tradition of Diasporic Literature and as a first-generation immigrant to Canada from India she belongs to what Vijay Mishra calls the 'new' Indian diaspora Literature of the Indian Diaspora. It also explains how Badami deals with the complexities of Indian family life and cross-cultural effects on Indian families in India and Canada in her novels, especially *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* in which Indo-Canadian exodus sheds light on how the people, who belong to Punjabi-Sikh Community in India feel the difference in culture and tradition when they happen to migrant from their homeland. The setting of this novel is both in India and Vancouver.

Keywords

Anita Rau Badami, *Can You Hear The Nightbird Call?* Complexity, Culture, Tradition, Exodus, Community, Alienation, Discrimination, Sikh Community.

.....



CULTURAL ALIENATION AND DISCRIMINATION AS PICTURIZED BY ANITA RAU BADAMI IN HER NOVEL *CAN YOU HEAR THE NIGHTBIRD CALL?* : A BRIEF ANALYSIS

DR. N. KAUSHI REDDY, (MA, MPhil, PHD)
Assistant Professor, Department of English
Kristu Jayanti College
Bengaluru, Karnataka

.....

Anita Rau Badami is one of the newest writers in the vibrant field of Indian Diasporic Literature. In her novels like *Tamarind Mem*, *The Hero's Walk* and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* She beautifully exposes the cross-culture that immigrants face when they move from one place to another. She herself experienced and said that in her life during her childhood days, she had migrated to many places as her father was a mechanical engineer who got transferred frequently on official assignment. Badami was born in 1964 in the town Rourkela in Orissa. After completing her under graduation in English at the University of Madras, she went on to study Journalism of Sofia College, Bombay. Before pursuing her career as a full time writer, Badami worked as a copy writer in advertising Agencies in Bombay, Bangalore and Madras.

Following her marriage in 1984 and after the birth of her son in 1987, Badami moved to Canada in 1991 where she completed her Masters Degree in Creative Writing under the supervision of a Canadian novelist and scholar Anita Van Herk. *Railway and Ginger* was a version of her first published novel *Tamarind Mem*. Similarly, her short stories - *Tracks*, *Lukammini's Room* and *Ajji's Miracle* can be viewed as early writing experiments that Badami expands upon in her later novels. *Tamarind Mem* is loosely based on the author's own life, whose father like that of her protagonists was a mechanical engineer for Railroads. The autobiographical elements that many of its critics have noted do not undermine the novel's broader social implications. The novel is divided into two parts to indicate the division between the perspectives of mother, Saroja and her daughter, Kamini. The two women reflect upon their own lives and their relationship with one another. Part I is told from the perspective of Kamini who lives in Calgary while the second half of the novel retells Kamini's story from Saroja's side in India. The differences between their stories that related similar events comprise the novel's central tension: cultural affiliation versus individual desire. Following the critical acclaim her first novel received, Badami wrote her much anticipated second novel *The Hero's Walk*.

The Hero's Walk quickly became the best seller in both the United States and Canada. It won a series of literary prizes including the 2001 Regional Commonwealth Prize for the best book and Canada's Marian Engel Award for literary fiction. Like her first novel, *The Hero's Walk* develops the disjunction that occurs between parents and their children as a result of conflicting desires and commitments. Set primarily in South India with a brief foray into Western Canada, the novel focuses on the life and times of Sripati Rao, a middle-aged man who has devoted his life to the well-being of his incongruent family members. Maya, his beloved daughter, shuns family tradition and honour when she marries a non-Indian in Canada. Only after Maya's death, Sripathi is forced to face the mistakes of his decisions in the form of his silent and brooding grand-daughter Nandana. Caught between the by Cultural Forces and social demands represented by Canada and India, Badami's fiction illustrates the emotional tension that underlie the current notions of the South Asian diaspora.

Anita Rau Badami belongs to the tradition of Diasporic literature. She can be classified along with the writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Shashi Tharoor, Amitva Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri and Harikunzru who explore various aspects of diasporic existence. Badami, as a first-generation immigrant to Canada from India belongs to what Vijaay Mishra calls the 'new' Indian diaspora. *Literature of the Indian Diaspora* is a major study of the literature and other cultural texts of the Indian diaspora. It is the work of Vijay Mishra which is not only a major study of the literature and other cultural texts of the Indian diaspora, but also an important contribution to diasporic theory in general. Mishra examines both the 'old' Indian diaspora of early capitalism following the abolition of slavery, and the 'new' diaspora linked to movements of late Capitalism. Mishra argues that a full understanding of the Indian diaspora can only be achieved, if attention is focused on locations of both the 'old' and the 'new' in nation-states. Applying a theoretical framework based on trauma, mourning, spectres, identity, travel, translation and recognition, Mishra uses the term imaginary to refer to any ethnic enclave in a nation-state that defines itself, consciously. He examines the works of key writers, many now based across the globe in Canada, Australia, the USA and the UK - U.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, M.G. Vasenji, Shani Mootoo, David Dabydeen, Rohinton Mistry and Hanifekureishi, among them to show how they exemplifying both the diasporic imaginary and the respective traumas of the 'old' and 'new' Indian diasporas.

The 'old' Indian diasporas, which began as a result of the end of slavery brought indentured labourers to British colonies and produced cultural enclaves - or as Mishra calls them, "little Indians". On the 'other hand, he argues that the new Indian diaspora of the mind to late 20th century has the overriding characteristic of mobility". Badami herself has always been particularly mobile. Even when she was a child, her family resettled every two or three years, since her father was a Mechanical Engineer for the Railways and was transferred frequently. Badami also belongs to the class of diasporans who choose to resettle in other countries, in her case for educational purposes. Badami, says, "I as 29 years in India and 10 years here, so I have one foot in India and a couple of toes here" (*The Globe and Main* 43).

Both Badami and her husband have graduate degrees from Canadian Universities. Her own history of mobility and relative freedom to move has let her to foreground the importance of mobility to the characters in her books. Like her, many of them belong to Mishra's 'new diaspora' or two Said's category of Emigres. Both of these categories imply not only that their subjects have a certain degree of choice in their resettlement but also that they maintain familiar ties in and communication with the homeland. In *Tamarin Mem*, for example, Kamini

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132

moves to the University of Calgary to study for her doctorate in Chemical Engineering, yet she still calls her mother Saroja, who is in Madras regularly and also keeps a close relationship with her sister, who lives in the United States. Saroja also chooses to take her journey across India mainly because she wants to go; she is not forced to move. In *The Hero's Walk*, Maya likewise chooses to attend a University in the United States and then move to Canada. In her novel, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* also the characters like Sharan, Balu, Leela, Jasbeer migrate to Canada.

In general, Badami deals with the complexities of Indian family life and the cross-cultural effects of Indian families in India and Canada in her novels. 'Cross-Culture' refers to comparing or dealing with two different cultures. The critics like Mathew Arnold and Raymond Williams believe that literature is the best medium for preserving and the best vehicle for the transmission of culture from generation to generation, thus forming and perpetuating a tradition in culture. In *Can you Hear the Night Bird Call?*, Indo-Canadian exodus sheds light on how the people who belong to Punjabi-Sikh community in India feel the difference in feel the difference in culture and tradition when they happen to migrate from their homeland. Through the story of three women who are destroyed by the political turmoil, the author depicts the effects of cross-culture in the novel. Here in her novel *Can You Hear the Nightbirth Call?* Badami, deals with the experiences of the Indian Diaspora in Canada. Like her previous novels, this novel is also set in India and Canada. She describes the cross-cultural experience by the Indian immigrants in Canada and the conflict inherent in their diasporic experiences. "This novel explores three discrete, yet politically and culturally linked events spanning the twentieth century that are inextricably linked to the Sikh Diaspora in Canada and the Sikh community in India" (Agarwal 111). The narrative links the diastrous voyage of the Komagatamam to Vancouver in 1914, the traumatic violence of partition in 1947 that rent the Punjab in two halves between India and Pakistan, and the Air India Hijacking of 1989 in the wake of the anti-sikh riots in 1984 in one brilliant arc. The narrative in this novel is structure through interwoven portraits of three female characters: Sharan, the beautiful and feisty village girl who matures into the prosperous Bibiji and settles in Vancouver; Nimmo, the lower-middle-class daughter of Sharon's sister, who lives in Delhi; and Leela Bhat, 'a half-caste' from Bangalore, who sacrifices the hard won identity bestowed on her by her marriage into the 'famous Gundoor Bhat's, only to become a struggling immigrant working at a shoe store, as she follows her husband to Vancouver. Another main character is Nimmo's son Jasbeer who carries the burden of the diasporic experience of moving from one cultural state of existence to another. In a new familiar move in post-colonial writing, in inserts personal, impression, 'stic memory into large historical events. Badami depicts the cross cultural conflict between East and West through the portrayal of these major characters. This novel is ultimately a story about connectedness between people and their far-flung words just as a Indra'sNet, a mythical story read by Leela's daughter.

Indra the god of heaven flung a net over the world.... Its shining strands criss-crossed the world from end to end. At each nod of this net there hung a gem, so arranged that if you looked at one you saw all the others reflected in it. As each gem reflected every other one, so was every human affected by the miseries and joys of every other human, every other living thing on the planet. When one gem was touched, hundreds of others shimmered or danced in response, and a tear in the net made the whole world tremble. (106)

As Calgary Herald rightly points out, *Can You Hear the Night Bird Call?* shows the enduring state of in-between 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 of tension, misunderstanding, and sometimes violence” (*Massachusetts Review* 5).

The novel begins with the story of Bibiji, the protagonist who is known as Sharanjeet Kaur. She belongs to the Sikha community and hails from a village called Panjaur, West Punjab. There is a cluster of Sikh and Hindu houses separated from the Muslim homes by fields of swaying sugar. Sharan becomes jealous of her friend Jeeti’s large brick house. “But the thing she envied most of all was Jeeti’s supply of lavender soap, sent by Sher Singh, her father all way from Canada” (P 4). According to Sharan, Canada is a place rich with luxuries like lavender soap and chocolate, the magical place from which people return not only with money, but with great wealth of knowledge. Cultural difference is found among the people within the same place who have their own stone in the village, which is believed by the Hindus of the village to harbour a powerful goddess which has been reared out of earth. It is smeared with turmeric and vermillion and someone has scattered flowers around it. She touches the stone whispering a prayer but as a Sikh, she is not supposed to worship idols, stones and pictures.

Harjot Singh, Sharan’s father is preoccupied with the green and blue city called Vancouver which he has once seen from the deck of the ship ‘Komagata Maru’. He and the other passengers on the ‘Komagata Maru... had been refused entry to Canada and ship turned back” (13).

He is influenced by Jeetu’s father, Sher Singh who sends wonderful things like soap, chocolate, paper, pencils and socks from Canada. He says to his daughter:

I was almost there, Putthar. Like Sher Singh, I could have lived in Canada and become rich... If they had allowed us to stay there, you know what your life would have been like?... If they had allowed me to get off the Komagata Maru, you and your mother and your sister would now be living like queens. (11)

Sharan has not stepped outside the close circle of her village and so she wonders at her father’s tales of the unimaginably distant lands he has crossed to reach the place called Canada. Sher Singh when he returned from Canada adds oil to the fuel by saying.

“There was no doubt that Abroad caused magic to occur: Illiterate men came back not only with money but with that other, more powerful thing—knowledge—I have worked hard and made money. Why not you too?” (15)

Harjot Singh borrows money from a money lender and he left for Canada. Somniya comes with a marriage proposal for Kanwar, Sharon’s sister. The man who is named Khushwant Singh lives in Canada, which has filled Sharan with envy. Since her childhood, she has been thinking to live in that distant foreign land, Canada. As per her husband’s arrangements, Sharan goes to Amritsar where she was tutored in the English language by a Gori Memsahib named Mrs. Hardy. Her husband wants her to accommodate herself in both the old and new world. He writes “you need both languages, the language of our soul and that of the goras” (33). On Saturdays and Sundays, she goes to the temple to learn a different alphabet at the free school run by the priests, to become the two-edged sword.

Sharan has changed from an illiterate village farmer’s daughter to a city girl who knows how to read and write. She was modified herself to adapt with the changing new culture in Canada. She transforms as a westernized woman that she has surreptitiously broken the religious rules of god-fearing Sikhs and cut her hair a few inches to even out the ragged ends. She is ready to rake her future in her own hands and she sails to Vancouver. “She finally set

The Expression: An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

(A Peer Reviewed and Indexed Journal with Impact Factor 6.4)

www.expressionjournal.com ISSN: 2395-4132

foot on the damp earth. Sharanjeet Kaur felt that she had overcome space and time and won the country that had turned her father away all those years ago" (36). In Canada, they are addressed according to the Western culture. Sharon is called as Bibiji and Khushwant Singh as Paoji. They have owned the 'East India Foods and Groceries' which is an Indian grocery shop. Her life is enriched by all manners of luxuries. Though Bibi-ji is far away from her homeland, she gets to know about her native India through her sister's letters. The immigrants face discrimination in the foreign land as they belong to different culture. In this novel, Bibiji who is born in India and settles in Canada is discriminated by a gora who belongs to Canada. No doubt, all characters are found to be undergoing cultural dislocation in the novel. In short, it may be said that Badami has beautifully depicted in the novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* the cultural alienation and discrimination that Indians face when they migrate to Canada.

Works Cited

- Agarwal, Beena. "Partition and the Predicament of Sikh Minority in Anita Desai Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*" *The Commonwealth Review*, vol. 19, 2, 2019.
- Badami, Anita Rau. *Can You Hear a Nightbird Call?* Penguin Books, 2006.
- Bhattacharya, Swagata. "Linking Homelands and Diasporas: A Study of Anita Rau Badami's Novels." *Literary Insight*, 4 January 2013.
- Kaur, Rejender, Rev. *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* By Anita Rau Badami. *South Asian Review*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2007.
- Thilakaranthne, Indeewara. "Diaspora and Disapora Literature". *Sunday Observer*, vol.1, no. 2, 2001, 15 May, 2011.
- Sanga, Jaina. C. editor. *South Asian Novelists in English*. Greenwood Press, 2003.