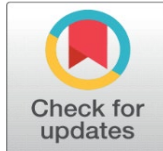


DISCONTINUOUS JOURNEYS: READING ANITA RAO BADAMI'S CAN YOU HEAR THE NIGHTBIRD CALL? AS A SOUTH ASIAN CANADIAN DIASPORIC TEXT

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the South Asian Canadian diaspora through Anita Rao Badami's novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* It discusses the significant presence of the South Asian Canadian diaspora in Canada since the 1970s, highlighting their contributions to the economy, politics, and culture while maintaining their cultural heritage. It notes the challenges and successes faced by this community, particularly in terms of immigration, inclusion, and identity while dealing with the diasporic sensibilities and experiences of families from Punjab and South India, weaving significant historical events like:

- The Partition of India
- The Komagata Maru incident
- Indira Gandhi's assassination
- The 1984 anti-Sikh riots

Can You Hear the Nightbird Call? is a complex narrative addressing historical trauma and memory, using the symbol of the nightbird's call to represent freedom, hope, and cultural heritage. The novel's characters, such as Sharanjit Kaur (Bibi-ji) and Leela Bhat, embody the struggles of displacement, identity, and cultural assimilation. The paper highlights how these characters navigate their hybrid identities and the impact of political events on their lives. It discusses broader themes of existential rootlessness, alienation, and the quest for identity common in diasporic literature. In conclusion, the paper asserts that Badami's novel captures the fractured identities and discontinuous journeys of its diasporic characters, effectively intertwining personal narratives with significant political upheavals.



Keywords: Violence, Dislocation, Partition, Diaspora

1. INTRODUCTION

South Asian Canadian diaspora has made a formidable presence in literature and cultural scenario of Canada since 1970s. Although the influx of South Asians in Canada started in 1960s, yet it remained in the formative stages for almost a decade. It is a commonplace knowledge that South Asian Canadian diaspora refers to the community of people of South Asian descent living in Canada. South Asians are one of the largest visible minority groups in Canada, with a population of over 1.9 million people, mostly from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. South Asian subcontinent comprises of the nations such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. South-Asian Canadian diaspora has high population concentration in cities like Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal. South Asians is a diverse community with various languages, religions and cultural practices and presently this community of the South Asians is making a significant contribution to Canadian economy, politics, and culture. What is important about this community is how it is maintaining cultural heritage while integrating into Canadian society and it is experiencing both success and challenges, related to immigration, inclusion and identity as represented by the writers of South Asian Canadian diaspora in their narratives.

South Asian Diaspora community has a significant presence globally, more so in regions such as United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Southeast Asia, South Africa, Kenya and The Middle East (UAE, Saudi Arabia). The South Asian Diaspora community has maintained strong cultural, social and economic ties with their countries of origin,

contributing to the exchange of ideas, traditions and innovations between their host and home countries. The first entry of South Asian Community on Canadian soil, as recorded in the history was to attend the commemoration of Queen Victoria of England's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. It was somewhere around 1947-48 that Canadians having South Asian ancestry were absorbed fully in Canadian Soil when they got the right to vote, both in federal and provincial elections and could become Canadian citizens.

It was in 1980's that South Asian Canadian literature became an object of vigorous critical attention and as a separate category of study. In the twenty first century with the establishment of Asian Canadian literary studies, a host of new grounds opened up for literary research in this field. It gave impetus to nuanced reading of South Asian Canadian texts and contexts, the prominent being Diaspora and Transnational Studies, including Gender Studies.

Anita Rao Badami is a Canadian writer of Indian descent, was born in Rourkela, married to a South Indian Kannada speaking family. She relocated to Canada to join her husband in Calgary, where she had to face a lot of hardship and multitasking, that is reflected and represented in her narratives. The present paper has taken up Badami's celebrated work *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* which forms the part of the research project on diasporic experiences of South-Asian Canadians. The narrative primarily deals with diasporic sensibilities and experiences of a few families from Punjab and also South India. Badami, in this complex narrative has woven some significant facts and events in the history of India and specifically Punjab, that changed the lives of thousands of human beings.

Badami's third work *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) is a powerful exploration of the Indian diaspora experience, historical trauma and memory. This novel deals with a heavier subject and has wider purview. Unlike her earlier works, this novel is clearly an attempt to awaken society's conscience. The nightbird's call is a symbol of freedom, hope and connection to one's cultural heritage. Being herself born in Odissa and married in traditional South Indian family, what spurred Badami to write a novel, partially set in a village of pre-partition Punjab, Delhi and Vancouver? She has chronicled the life of Sharanjit Kaur and her family from pre-partition days and how partition played havoc with the lives of thousands of innocent victims and how the incident of Komagata Maru, a tragic event changed and jolted the lives of many Sikhs and how to settle in Canada became an obsessive dream and how Indira Gandhi's assassination and the consequent 1984 riots created an unmatched violence, which had its reverberations on Canadian soil and how Kanishka bombing of 1985 killed the dream and dreamer Leela, who had, with such difficulty got an opportunity to visit her nation, which for diasporic in those days is nothing less than a pilgrimage back home. In a detailed interview Badami has very clearly confessed the larger call that prompted her to write this novel. "One of the things that I tried to address in this book is the ways in which very ordinary lives can be affected by larger things like politics and history and destroyed by those same forces" (Tancock).

In the very beginning of the novel, Badami has set the tone of yearning and longing in the mind of Sharanjit Kaur, the protagonist and the main voice for Canada, where she imagines the life would be better. Even as a very small child, she is envious of her best friend Jeeti, because of her "supply of lavender soap, sent by Sher Singh, her father, all the way from Canada" (Badami 4). lavender soap and its yearning is a metaphor for the lure of the West that sets the people on fire to immigrate. Worth quoting is the observation of Jennifer Randall who says, "the fresh-off-the boat migrant is confronted with excess which, soon enough equates to emptiness, a loss in translation which suggests the inflationary/deflationary quality of border-crossing. The monetary connotations in these binary terms of loss/gain also serve to remind us that a cultural transaction takes place during the crossing, which itself is often spurred by economic reasons" (Randall 34).

The text revolves around the hybrid lives of migrants of Indian origin in Vancouver, Canada. Badami has woven the narrative through a 'butterfly effect' logic covering the 1920s, when for the first time Indians started migrating to Canada and when the tragic incident of Komagata maru happened, quashing the lives and dreams of many North Indian Punjabis in 1985, the year of the tragic terrorist bombing of Kanishka, Air India flight 182 between Canada and India.

In between these two incidents, the major upheaval in Indian history, the partition, that happened in 1947, when two nations were arbitrarily created, India and Pakistan is also an important part of the narrative. In fact, the narrative opens in the undivided Indian small village Panjaur in West Punjab before the partition. Partition has been made the subject matter of different literary narratives being one of the most traumatic events in the history of the world as also of India. Many creative writers like Sadat Hasan Manto, Khushwant Singh, Bapsi Sidhwa, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amitav Ghosh, Amrita Pritam, Manohar Malgonkar, Shiv K. Kumar to name a few, have made an attempt to bring out different implications of this traumatic event. Many diasporic writers like Badami have taken up this gory, historic-political event in their creative journeys. Worth quoting is Dr. Tejinder Kaur's observation on diasporic response to this event when she says:

"By placing their characters from India and Pakistan together in different situations in transnational lands and cultures interacting with one another and with the natives of the adopted lands. They have revealed that even after having crossed the geographical space of the territories of the nations of their origin along with the baggage of other memories, they have not left behind their memories of the experience of the pains and pangs of partition and these are transmitted off and on to their children also, born and brought up in the new lands" (Kaur 344).

Before establishing herself as Bibi-ji, a well-established and sufficiently rich matriarch of the Sikh community of Vancouver, Sharanjit was a deprived girl and now as Bibi-ji, her bubbly character hides her deep-rooted guilt and mourning over the loss of her sister Kanwar, who died during the partition in 1947. The lavender scented soap which Bibi-ji initially yearned for becomes associated with the rape and death of her sister and this follows her all through her life, even in Vancouver.

The novel begins with the idea of yearning which is associated with dream of adopting a new land of opportunities that is Canada. Harjot Singh, Sharanjit's father becomes disoriented and eternally depressed when he is unable to put his foot on the land of his dreams, due to the tragic incident of Komagata Maru ship, which was denied entry and forced to return to Budge Budge, near Kolkata. Harjot Singh is one of the 376 passengers from Punjab province in British India who had to suffer because of the Exclusion Laws in Canada and United States which excluded immigrants of Asian origin. The unfulfilled dream played havoc with Harjot Singh's psyche who remains an in-corrigible dreamer, for the rest of his life. "In his mind he was continents away, in green and blue city called Vancouver, which he had once seen from the deck - of a ship - a place that had turned him away from its shores as if he were a pariah dog" (Badami 10). This journey becomes discontinuous in the literal sense and the unfulfilled desire of the father becomes an obsession for Sharanjeet, who goes to the extent of robbing her sister Kanwar of the destiny of getting married to Pa-ji, settled in Canada.

The villagers, poor farmers, fed up of 'the capriciousness of the monsoon,' looked up to other opportunities to come out of their poverty and "Abroad caused magic to occur: illiterate men came back not only with money but with that other more powerful thing-knowledge" (Badami 15). The urge to adopt new lands is primarily due to the better future prospects that the land like Canada offers for South Asians. The political conspiracy that divided India into two halves has also created a havoc in lives of many like Sharanjit Kaur and Pa-ji to look for stability as well as prosperity elsewhere. The Pakistan and India divide recorded one of the largest migrations of human populations ever registered in human history, which left millions of people dead on both sides, homeless, completely shattered and mutilated in body and mind. The unjust and arbitrary migrations and dislocations caused due to partition also goaded many Punjabis to seek new pastures in the developed countries like Canada.

Another parallel plot, that runs in the novel is that of Leela Bhat, who calls herself half and half, being the child of Brahmin father and a German mother. Rosa Schweers, "a casteless German woman of no known family" (Badami 77) is Leela's mother, who is unable to acclimatise herself in a foreign soil and strict South Indian family culture. Rosa's cultural assimilation in South Indian family remains incomplete and she is never accepted and remains an 'outsider'. She too is displaced, from London, where Hari Shastri fell in love with her and brought her to India as his wife. Most of her time, she spent in her 'darkened room' as "everything made her ill or nervous- the dust, the heat, the food, the old neem tree..." (Badami 79). Rosa is never accepted in the strict South-Indian culture, where her mother-in-law, Akka considers her as a disgrace to the family. The conflict between Rosa and Akka diffused only when Leela was born, but unfortunately, she did not get any love from her mother or grandmother and is brought up by the cook Venki. She remains 'half and half child of his mismatched parents' (Badami 82). Rosa's death, in the pond, to which Leela is a witness is a relief to her. She learnt to survive, after her mother's death and adjusts well to "the safety of the house behind her, the solidity of its walls, its pillars, its foundations. Inside that house lived respectability and stability; rites and rituals were strictly observed and festivals, ceremonies were performed according to the rules laid down by her Hindu Brahmin forefathers" (86). With her strong will to survive she takes charge of her father and also wins the hand of Balachandra Bhat and adopts a different and complete identity that she always dreamed of, with Balu, her husband in the teaching profession and she like a typical Indian woman, taking charge of household routines. In Leela's case it is her husband, who is drawn to distant lands, for better prospects. This longing to go to new far-off lands finally sees him and Leela in Vancouver with their children, Arjun and Preeti. Life once again brings her to that in-between syndrome to escape from which she had been struggling throughout her childhood, being "half breed"

Anita Rao Badami, herself being a diasporic writer, is able to capture and represent in her writings, different facets of unsettlement and displacement through her fictional characters especially, in the present context, Leela, who, unlike Sharanjeet Kaur (Bibi-ji) has no dream or urge to migrate to new lands. She is happily settled in her role as a professor's wife and has craftily settled into marriage with Balachandra Bhat, "the only son of widowed Mrs Bhat, a doctorate in

Chemical Engineering from the highly regarded Indian Institute of Science" (Badami 91). What goaded Bhat to yearn to change his well settled life is difficult to pinpoint, but worth quoting here is Kevin Cool's observation that "the West remains a romantic place that inspires dreams and attracts dreamers". The immediate cause that propels Balu to migrate to Canada is the letter of his friend Venkat Rao from Toronto. He is entranced by fairytale quality of the frost-edged pine trees in the background" (Badami 95) of the pictures sent by his friend. He is enamoured of the cleanliness and also the snow that he sees in picture. South Asian Indians migrate for various reasons which can be broadly categorised into economic, social, political and personal factors, and in case of Balu it is the beauty and better standard of living. There is no specific reason "Later when he tried to explain to Leela his desire for them to leave the country, he described his feelings ...filled with the smell of the dark smoke of departure, of distant places" (Badami 76).

It is the falling of the arch, which had been built by Balu's grandfather that confirms his decision to go. It is only, in a split of a second, that Balu is saved and that arch falls on two people, causing their death. This becomes a turning point in Balu's life who tells Leela "your gods are telling us to leave this place. Go, go, they are saying before the rest of this town buries you as well" (Badami 97).

More than how the immigrants like Leela and Sharanjit Kaur, Jasbeer and Pa-ji learn to adopt, adapt and settle in Vancouver, it is the reason or desire in them to leave their homeland on which Badami has dwelt in this novel. Their journeys to the new land remain discontinuous, especially in case of Leela, who just evaporates in the Kanishka bombing of the aircraft – Air India, during her return journey back to India after almost a decade, for which she has been so excited. *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Is a through and through a diasporic text as, like most of the diaspora writings and literatures, it deals with existential rootlessness, alienation, displacement, nostalgia and quest for identity. It also addresses issues concerning amalgamation as well as disintegration of cultures. In Bibi-ji, Leela and Jasbeer along with many other characters the novel reflects the immigrant's experience that comes out of the immigrant's settlement. Ezhil Prafula L's general observation on immigrants' experience is worth quoting here "As immigrants are between two places and two cultures, the expatriate writer navigates a new literary space. The diaspora literature arises under these circumstances" (Prafula L 1).

The issue of adoption and adaption in the new land, is an experience that differs from individual-to-individual, Bibi-ji, who goes to settle in Vancouver twenty years after her father's aborted attempt in Komagata Maru incident, does her best to become more Indian than Indians enjoying and relishing the authenticity of the Indian products that she sells in her convenience store on Main Street. It's a common place knowledge that the Indian diaspora settled in different parts of the world, are, by and large more active in establishing their Indianness by observing rituals and also sometimes striking on to their own dress, instead of switching over to the dress and culture of the host land. This over enthusiasm or preserving their own culture is primarily due to the distance that separates these diasporics from their homeland, which adds to the charm and appeal. There is also a tendency in the diaspora to ghettoize and be helpful to each other in an alien land. This is what Pa-ji explains to his wife, "People helped me when I came here, and this is my way of paying back. We are strangers in this land and have nobody but our community to turn to" (Badami 47). In this context, Randall's observation fits in very well when she says, "to that effect, all boundaries become porous, including those of contemporary international geopolitical which because they have been drawn according to the priorities of Nation States, do not readily accommodate the needs of transmigratory identities" (Randall 35).

Leela, and her experience of immigration is quite in contrast to Bibi-ji and in a sense, she is an anomaly. Moving to Canada is against her own will as in India, she has with much difficulty sealed off her margins being 'half and half'. By marrying into a Brahmin family, she has removed her status as an outcast and has comfortably adjusted in Hindu society as she is accepted as Mrs Balu now. By moving to Canada, she is again caught in the web of in-betweenness.

"She would cut this new world into the shape that she wished it to be. Pull at the edges that did not match the pattern of her memories and rename it. She would redraw maps and mythologies like the settlers who came before her [...]. Like them, she would make this corner of the world her own until it was time to return home" (Badami 111).

The tailoring metaphor as used by Badami in delineating Leela's predicament also hints at the power of fiction to "design a new self" to disregard political borders in fashioning of personal "mythologies", in an ironic reversal of colonization" (Randall 36). Badami, in a deft writing style, shows how Indian culture, cannot come to terms with White culture. She has with splash of humour here and there, hinted at the incompatible nature of the two cultures. Even, cultural trials are blown up, depicting the exaggerated representation of history, religion and culture.

Bibi-ji, who adopts son of Nimmo, in order to salve her conscience, fails to make him adapt foreign land. He exhibits alienation, identity crisis and is influenced by nationalism. He constantly feels that he is in exile. His trauma is double, as

he is not only separated from his homeland, but also from his parents. Religion and politics get intertwined, and Jasbeer shows his desire for political power through his misplaced idea of religion. On the one hand, if Pa-ji teaches religion to Jasbeer, Doctor Randhawa's speech induces politics in him. Dr. Randhawa is a supporter of Khalistan and young boys like Jasbeer, who are rootless and depressed get influenced and misdirected. Jasbeer's sense of abandonment drives him to get involved with terrorist organizations and he becomes the violent proponent of Khalistan. In the operation Blue Star, that was conducted by Indian Armed Forces to remove Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and other Sikh Militants from Golden Temple, the holy site of Sikhism, Pa-ji is killed as a civilian casualty. Pa-ji and Sharanjeet had gone to visit Golden Temple at that time. Jasbir gets inextricably linked with the death of Pa-ji along with thousands others. He is imprisoned by the police for being a terrorist. The yearning for home gets more pronounced, and he decides to go back home. When he writes to his aunt Bibi-Ji and tells her about his desire to be "home soon" (Badami 395), She is puzzled "Home? She thinks. Her heart flutters with hope for a moment. But which one?" (Badami 395). Bhattacharya's take on contested identities fits very well with the confusion about home that Sharanjeet experiences at the end of the novel.

"The fluidity of once past or history enables it to be forming and reforming and takes forms and shapes accordingly. Also, today in a postcolonial/global world, in the global village that we live in, humans attempt to occupy spaces instead of places, where concepts of migrations, identity (s) and personal histories merge for both contestation and re-negotiation" (1).

At the end of the novel, Jasbeer remains a recluse, he doesn't fit in anywhere. He is neither here nor there and his journey remains discontinuous, and his identity fractured. The home that he thinks he will reach is elusive, as everything is changed. "He is nearly home" (Badami 402) but not home.

The longing for the past and home keeps playing in the minds of the characters in the novel in unique ways. Pa-ji who is ostensibly well-settled, keeps negotiating with his past and memories of home by rendering help to the Sikh community that migrates to Canada. He is happy that his religion is flourishing across the globe. As Bhatt comments "Religion is another identity-marker that helps Indians preserve their individual self-awareness and group cohesion" (Bhatt 8). But unfortunately, Pa-ji gets inadvertently sacrificed on the altar of religion in his own holy shrine in his own homeland. The novel ends on a very sad note. Sharanjeet is left alone, alienated and depressed in Canada, doubly guilty as she didn't stop Leela from boarding the ill-fated flight about which she had the knowledge. The Hindu Sikh identity gets so sharpened after 1984 riots and also after the tragic death of Pa-ji that she vehemently clings to her Sikh identity, forgetting that she is an Indian first. The Conundrum of identity create many confusions and, in this novel, Badami shows that Sikhs in India and also in Canada find themselves alienated, not a part of majority Hindus. There in starts the rift between Hindus and Sikhs, which ends in heinous assassination of Indira Gandhi, Hindu-Sikh unrest and violence, 1984 riots, storming of Golden Temple and bombing of Air India flight.

To conclude, one may say that Badami has captured the fractured identities and discontinuous journeys of the diasporic characters in the novel, weaving the narrative deftly with political upheavals that affect the lives of those who are settled abroad in places like Canada.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

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