

Communal Violence, Trauma and Dislocation: Females of Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

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ABSTRACT

Women have always been a victim of one or another type of violence whether it is communal, political, social, or domestic. Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* in its backdrop has communal violence which happened in India and across borders where women figure is at the receiving end. The three female characters Bibiji, Leela and Nimmo face victimization and trauma due to the Sikh separatist movement which has its echoes in Canada also, and the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots in India as Bibiji and Nimmo suffer the loss of men in their lives and Leela has to lose her life in air tragedy. The violence travels across distance and space and affects these women irrespective of their location, community, or social status. The present paper offers to critically analyze Badami's work and explores how communalism is essentially a politicized event that eventually victimizes the innocent and helpless commoners specifically the women who bear the brunt of it.

KEYWORDS

Common Man; Politics; Secular; Trauma; Violence

And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

“Dover Beach”

The above lines from Arnold's poem very aptly describe the pogrom-like situation. *Can You Hear the Night Bird Call?* by Anita Rau Badami is a pathetic tale of three women linked in tragedy over a period ranging from 1928 to 1986. The chief occurrences are II World War (1939-1945), 1947 India- Pakistan holocaust, 1965 Indo-China war, 1975 Emergency, 1984 Operation Blue Star, Assassination of Indira Gandhi on 31st October 1984, post-Anti Sikh Riots, the explosion of Air India flight 182 off the coast of Ireland in 1985.

The 1947 Indian partition left a great mark on the psyche of the Indian nation. It is alleged against Britishers for creating divisions in society. “They were the ones who divided the Muslims and the Hindus so they could rule, and then left the divisions to destroy both of us-Pakistan and India” (Badami 250). The pangs or echoes of separation stay undiminished in people's hearts, as Nimmo in the novel is haunted by her childhood memories of fear, terror, and separation from her parents. Gyanendra Pandey in his work

Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India aptly mentions,

Women who experience the trauma of communal violence are sometimes unable to articulate their experience or sometimes they speak of violence in the form of fictional narratives (Pandey 204).

Communal violence also happened in the post-Independence era. Although the Indian nation was declared secular by constitution makers that means in India there is no declared religion of the nation and even the right to religious freedom is also granted to Indian citizens as one of the fundamental rights. Our freedom fighters dreamt of a United India but people can't stop themselves from being captive to their religious sentiments. It is this complexity that the novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* by Anita Rau Badami focuses on i.e., violence in the name of religion. This is the 1984 Anti-Sikh massacre where the Sikhs are brutally targeted. Communalism, David Ludden suggests that it is "collective antagonism organized around religious, linguistic and/or ethnic identities" (Ludden 12). Scholars such as Gyanendra Pandey and Edward Said argue that communalism was "a product of orientalism and the colonial state" (Ludden 11). Historicity and socio-cultural conflict are primarily demonstrated in this work. Basically, females' suffering reigns supreme in this work. Women's trauma is not always dependent on their own trauma such as rape, domestic violence and so on but can also be a result of the violence against the men in their lives in the name of narrow social dogmas.

The present paper analyses how rivalries in the name of religion can take common men's lives. It brings to the fore communal hatred and consequent vindictive violent retaliation which triumph over the basic principles of humanity such as love, compassion, and

respect for others' life and freedom. The novelist helps us understand how the communal approach is antithetical to all human considerations and sets one person against another. The most well-known human value of brotherhood and universal humanism is blown away by separatist powers in this fictional work by Anita Rau Badami.

The first narrative is of Bibiji, whose real name is Sharanjeet Kaur. She initially in the novel steals her sister Kanwar's groom Khushwant Singh, popular in the novel with the name of Paji as she is more beautiful than her sister Kanwar. After marriage, she has to stay with her parents as II World War's background is laid in 1938. In 1946 she has left for Vancouver to stay with her husband who runs a cafe there named The Delhi Junction.

When she finally set 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. Her life, she thought buoyantly, was complete. What more could she ask? (Badami 36).

The reference is to Komagata Maru ship (1935) that has to return back from the coast of Canada. Her father's unfulfilled dream is fulfilled in Bibiji's own life. There she was called Sharan-Bibi-ji, wife of Khushwant Singh, or Pajji, unchallenged owner of East India Food and Groceries, 2034 Main Street. "What a transformation she had undergone-from a girl named Sharanjeet to a woman of substance named Bibi-ji. (Badami 39)". But Bibiji remained childless throughout her life. She regrets, "She had stolen a life and she would not be allowed to give birth to another." (Badami 44)

Her sister Kanwar was married to one of Khushwant Singh's widower cousins with a son in a village Dauri Kalan some distance away from Panjaur. In 1947, the British left the Indian subcontinent, and

Punjab has been divided into two new nations-India and Pakistan. It becomes very painful for Indians to see India partitioned. As Bibiji's sister Kanwar writes to her very concernedly:

Ever since it was announced that there will be a division of land between the Hindus and the Mussulmans, there has been unrest everywhere. There are rumours that Punjab will be broken into two pieces-one piece of our heartland to stay in India and the other to go to Pakistan. This is the name that Muhammad Jinnah has chosen for his new country. I do not know which piece we will end up in. Where will my new child be born, I wonder? (Badami 44)

In August 1947, India and Pakistan become independent nations. On the other side, Paji and Bibiji are a happily married couple in Vancouver but Paji's heart in Vancouver longs for Indian dreams. As he says to his wife, "If this was India, I could have named the entire street Sharanjeet Kaur Avenue if I wanted to!" (Badami 63). The Indian nation is always in his imagination and assumes it to be a part of his being and it is where his memories often turned as contemporary theorist P K Nayar mentions that we imagine ourselves to be part and parcel of a nation after seeing our national symbols, its culture and other markers. But the Sikh community in India and across borders in Canada, is divided into two sects regarding the formation of a separate Sikh State-one that supports for separate Sikh state and is headed by Dr. Raghubir Randhawa, the Sikh scholar in Canada, and second, those who oppose the formation of separate Sikh state like Paji. Sanchari Sur of McMaster University too argues in his thesis on "Communal Violence, Truma and Indian Women: Fictional Representations of Women in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* and Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*" that there lies a

conflict between the origins of Indian communalism.

Paji, doesn't agree with Dr. Randhawa's idea of a separate Sikh country. Randhawa has a map of India without Punjab, the one that showed Khalistan. He says that Khalistan will be their country. But Paji doesn't appreciate this idea.

Paji was relieved when his guest left. All the talk of secession made him deeply uneasy. He hoped this was the last he would see of Dr. Randhawa and hear about a free country for Sikhs. He wished it would all go away" (Badami 257)

He can't see himself as different from India. In spite of being an Indian, Dr. Radhawa feels excluded from India, not part of India and works towards forming a separate state for Sikh community. In his words:

The Sikhs have been betrayed", he declared in florid Pujabi to the ceiling. We have been betrayed for two hundred years- first by the British, who stole Punjab that our great Maharaja Ranjit Singh won for us from the Mughals with valour and cunning; then by the Congress Brahmans, who gave the Mussulmans their Pakistan and the Hindus their India but left the Sikhs to die like flies in between... (Badami 252)

Dr. Randhawa in the novel is a symbol of separatist powers, time and again in his speeches in Canada he instigates the Sikh Community for an independent Sikh state. He shows maps to his audience:

He placed on top of the map the kingdom of Punjab another of India and Punjab as they appeared now, and then a third map showing the imagined Independent Country superimposed on the map of India (Badami 254).

Paji was not at all happy with the very idea of a separate Sikh state so objected to it and

said loudly, "As a Sikh I am interested in putting money into building things – like schools and hospitals –not for breaking up countries" (Badami 283).

Paji refused to be cowed. He increased the volume of his protests against the growing mood of violence in the temple. He wrote an article that was published in the local Punjabi -language newspaper, urging moderation and asking his fellow Sikhs not to bow to the wave of fundamentalism. (Badami 283)

But fundamentalists overpower Paji and he is assaulted for opposing the separate Sikh state. It is the beginning of riots in the novel in the name of religion and community. Paji's death is a great personal loss to Bibiji. She is the first female victim of communal violence and is unable to let go of the trauma of Paji's death. Her trauma let her avenge it later as she assists financially extremists in bomb plantation on Air India flight. As Ludden and Sandria Freitag argue, community identity based on religion, language or ethnicity evokes a feeling of belonging that comes into being in (antagonistic opposition to other groups).

Here is the story of the second female protagonist Leela who lost her life in the Kanishka Air Tragedy as a bomb was planted on Air India Flight 182 by Sikh separatists in Canada to avenge the Sikh deaths as every violent act boomerangs. It's the tragic denouement that the reader knows will unfold. The pitiable condition of her life can be seen in the words uttered by her daughter-"Even in death, neither country claimed her poor mother as its own." (Badami 397).

Leela, born in 1938 in the Indian city of Bangalore, was the daughter of a "casteless German" (Badami 77) mother Rosa Schweers, and high caste Hindu Brahmin father Hari Shastri and married to a typical Indian Hindu groom Balachandra Bhat, fondly known as Balu by his friends

and family. She experiences alienation within her family. She is ceaselessly taunted by her Hindu relatives at home and this instills in her a sense of metaphorical exile as a child (Badami 87). As poet Nissim Ezekiel calls home a place where we have to gather grace. But it was not so for Leela. Her mother's origin makes her realize that she is 'half and half' (Badami 74). "Was it Leela's fault that she was the product of that union? ...Leela feels as if her heart would burst with shame and hurt (Badami 78)." She would hide away in the Gods' room and pray to the silent silver idols there to make her mother disappear, to erase Rosa Schweers as if she had never been, for only then would she, Leela Shastri, begin to exist whole and unblemished (Badami 82-83).

Leela becomes the mother of two children- a son and a daughter, Arjun and Preethi. Later on, her husband receives a call from Canada. He finds a job there for a teaching position. A year and half later Leela also moves there with her children. Balu rents a house for them all. Their landlord in Vancouver is Paji, Bibiji's Husband. After reaching there, "she was overcome by a sense of betrayal. She had married Balu because of his apparent stability." (Badami 99) After her marriage, she tries to come out of her doubted past existence in her own family. Leela would introduce herself: "We belong to the Kunjoor Bhat Family-you know, the well-known one?" (Badami 115)

Leela Bhat at the time of departure from India, "waves goodbye to Balu's cousin and to India, it was without too much pain. She would be back soon, she thought, and then everything would be all right." (Badami 105) While entering the house there Leela instructs her daughter Preethi, "Right foot first ... otherwise we will have bad luck....Remember, it's an in-between space. Neither here nor there. It is dangerous" (Badami 110). Later on in the

novel her life ends in the same way as the plane crashes in Atlantic Ocean.

She becomes friends here with Bibiji and familiar with other Indian immigrants here in her neighborhood. But she doesn't go to Chinese grocers stating "China's responsibility for Nehru's Death" (Badami 136). Bibiji asks her for forgetfulness, "A bad memory was necessary for a person wishing to settle in, to become one of the crowd, to become an invisible minority... In this country we all are in the same boat" (Badami 136-137). Even after settling in Vancouver she pines for her India. The novel helps us observe that the novelist tries to stress the fact that her characters always feel attached to their original roots while living in foreign land, nation exists in their imagination.

The real India had overtaken Leela's memories of it. The news she saw in the two-week-old Indian Magazines that Balu brought home sometimes seemed to belong to a country she didn't know at all. Even the pictures of men and women in the advertisements astonished Leela- it was as if these people's bone structure had altered. They looked like her children-Indian, but with a subtle glossy westernness coating their brown bodies. (Badami 308-09)

Indian-origin people in Canada like Leela have a strong affinity to their Nation's nationalistic symbols such as the Indian flag as they celebrate their Independence Day with all fanfare and pride.

Leela, nodded and smiled. Nobody wanted to miss the Patel's Independence Day party, an annual event to which almost everyone who had roots in India was invited. All her friends were curious to see what new (and often bizarre) decorations. Sushma would create using saffron, white and green, the

colours of the Indian flag.
(Badmi263)

The characters' sense of belongingness doesn't emanate from their presence within or beyond their motherland. According to Diasporic theorist Vijay Mishra, new Diasporas keep their connection with the homeland "intact" through "family networks" (Mishra 422). Instead of forming a community there in isolation in the diaspora, new diasporas maintain these connections to the homeland through visits, communications and so on.

Finally Leela plans to visit her heartland and craves more for her roots even while taking his seat in the plane (Air India flight). She contemplates like Rushdie's "Imaginary Homelands":

I am going home. A doubt crept into her unbidden. Where was home exactly? Back in Vancouver or ahead of her in India? She had forgotten, lost her bearings. This is the house that Rama Shastri built. This is the well in the house that Rama Shastri built. This is the tamarind tree by the well in the house... (Badami 391)

Leela boards the flight to India, back home. She remembers her grandmother's saying,

Nothing worse to be a dangling person, a foot here and a foot there and a great gap in between. Imagine how painful it is to stay stretched like that forever" (Badami 392). She yawned, pulled her blanket over her legs, and fell into a deep sleep" (Badami 392). She... falling thirty-five thousand feet into the Atlantic Ocean far from home. Either home, neither home. Even in death, neither country claimed her

poor mother as its own
(Badami 397).

Leela experiences displacement that's slightly voluntary in nature but her rootedness is the basic concern for her as she always bears the stigma of a "half and half". The tragedy of her life is a result of "an eye for an eye" in communal violence. Here, the factors responsible for violence are religion and the lost cultural identity of an ethnicity.

The third female character is Nimmo, Bibiji's niece, a partition survivor, daughter of her sister Kanwar, who also suffers from the Communal violence badly eschewed by anti-Sikh riots. A reference to Nimmo the reader gets when Leela is going to the airport the taxi driver (Nimmo's husband) asks her to note down the address of his wife, *Nirmaljeet Kaur, daughter of Kanwar Kaur (sister of Sharan) and Pardeep Singh, Dauri Kalan Village* as her aunt (Bibiji lives there in Vancouver). Leela gives this address to Bibiji after reaching there in Vancouver. Consequently, Bibiji starts writing her niece letters for she is nostalgic conscientiously about her whereabouts. During partition, Nimmo lost her parents although her mother could save her by pushing into a dark room. Later she joins a refugee camp and gets adopted by a Sikh couple who has rescued her in the kafeela and married at the age of eighteen. Her husband Satpal is a taxi driver. At times she gets disturbed by the horrific scenes of partition.

She hated waking up and not finding her husband's body beside her. .. Her fear was a monstrous, silent thing that often woke her, sweating and shaking, from troubled sleep. It made her suspicious of everyone, even neighbours she had now known for many years, the woman who sold her

mangoes in summer and cauliflowers in winter, the milkman, the owner of the bidi shop, the electrician, the policeman- every single one of them was a threat to her security, her peace of mind.
(Badami 158-159)

Her husband asks her to let the fear go. Howsoever she thinks,

This gentle, unimaginative person she had married had no idea of the meaning of terror. How could she explain to him 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?
(Badami 159)

Her past childhood memories trouble her. Anyhow she manages to come out of those dark shadows moving with her since partition. She also responds to Bibiji by traveling to memory lane and engrosses herself in taking care of her family. Bibiji finally comes to meet her in India. In the embrace, she wanted to get away from the memory it evoked. "It was the smell of death and fear" (Badami 169). She memorizes that horrific site again. They both share a lot. Bibiji also helps Satpal financially. But expects one of their sons to go along with her to Vancouver. After consideration, Jasbeer was sent which Nimmo regrets later on. In the future, he joins the Sikh Separatist group Damdami taksal there.

She also gathers strength by seeing the then-woman prime minister Indira Gandhi. She says, "I like Indira-ji, she is smart and she gives us women courage. If we have a daughter, I want her to grow up into an Indira Gandhi!" (Badami 165). She is a mother of two sons Jasbeer and Pappu. This time she knows in some mysterious

way that this one would be a daughter. "I will always look after you, she murmured to her unborn child, I will give you everything your heart desires" (Badami 167). It was their daughter Kamal. But her daughter could not survive the anti-Sikh riots the way she herself survives the partition.

In October 1984 Premiere Indira Gandhi is assassinated by her two Sikh bodyguards. Resultantly anti-Sikh riots were triggered. Nimmo wanted to cry: You can lose everything in one single day, your past, your present and your future. (Badami 350)

While Bibiji loses her husband, Nimmo loses her entire family- her husband Satpal, her son Pappu and her daughter Kamal (except her son Jasbeer who was in Vancouver). When rioters approach Nimmo's house she locks her daughter Kamal in a steel Almirah but the protection could not work as the room is lit to fire and the keys are taken by them. Her son Pappu is also targeted from the hiding whereabouts in his father Satpal's Hindu partner's home and is put to flames. Her husband Satpal is brutally killed by the aggravated Hindu mob:

He jammed the iron rod under Satpal's turban and flipped it back hard dislodging the carefully coiled blue cloth to reveal the knot of grey hair neatly braided and bunched with a rubber band. "Open your hair, Sardar-ji!" He shoved the rod against Satpal's chest, forcing Satpal to fall back onto his feet. Let's see how long you have grown it, eating the salt of this country. (Badami 371)

Satpal, who was returning home, succumbs to a violent mob frenzied on communal grounds. At this very moment, he wishes he has had the time to phone Nimmo again. But before he could listen to his wife's voice he was put to flames.

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 are into his scalp, crept like a dreadful river down his face, licked at his eye brows, his eyelashes. The heat burned his eyes and his last thought was that he could not even weep. He could not even weep. (Badami 371)

Nimmo's story ends in her destitution as she has no one to work for except Jasbeer who became a militant in Canada. This shows that women are the end sufferers who become traumatized by communal violence, irrespective of their actual involvements and their backgrounds.

The room was dark, even though it was a brilliant morning outside. Her windows still shut, Nimmo lay on her bed unable to bear the thought of another day. She glanced at the clock; it ticked the passing hours relentlessly, uselessly, reminding her that it was eight o' clock, time to pack her husband's lunch box, nine o' clock, time for her daughter to leave for school, twelve o' clock, time for her son to arrive home for lunch. But there was no one to wait for. (Badami 376-377)

She even cannot muster up the courage to live. Nirmaljeet Kaur, a woman damaged in places too private to see (Badami 399). History recasts itself after thirty-five years (since 1947). She removes herself from public life, and even attempts suicide. This echoes Veena Das' postulation that women either negotiate their loss through silence

or by fictionalizing their accounts (Das 68-69). It portrays the dark side of politically coloured communal violence. Dipak Gupta in *Understanding Terrorism and Political Violence* (2008) states:

A politically motivated act is undertaken in the name of an entire community. Therefore, the instrumental goal of a violent act of dissidence is a public good that must be shared with the entire community regardless of the levels of participation by individual member (9)

Rao and Ramakrishna in their research paper titled "The Fictional World of Anita Rau Badami: A Study of Image of India" say that the novelist Anita Rau Badami whose roots in India made her observe people's strict adherence to the community set up in those days is reflected in all her novels. She raises her voice against this communal setup and tries to give a broad perspective to this narrow outlook. She has tried to strike a balance between the pros and cons of Indian life and her conflict to acclimatize her ways between East and West (vol 3, 1; 491-495).

The Bollywood movie *Amu* also has similar resonances. The 2005 Bollywood movie *Amu*, directed by Shonali Bose, is based on the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and the film is based on Bose's own novel by the same name.

Religious violence crosses borders despite their different locations in Vancouver and Delhi. Communal hatred and vengeance reign supreme to nationalistic feelings as Bibiji in spite of knowing that a bomb was planted on Air India Flight from Toronto to India didn't inform Leela about it even though Leela calls her before leaving. Finally, she loses her life before reaching her country. The vindictive sense even compelled Bibiji to forget friendliness and harmony, in spite of their amiable relationship in Canada for a long time. This communal frenzy takes

over and cripples commonsense. She uses her financial power for revenge on behalf of militant Sikhs in Canada. The females' ways of dealing with loss also point to their evolving religious identities in the face of trauma. Although Nimmo stays away from the revenge mentality and Bibiji harbours it.

The novel evocatively reveals how women are torn apart by their losses and how communal violence takes away the stability that the three females have. It shows how dynamics of class, caste, religion and location can function in the background of communal violence and trauma as a result of that violence.

The only solution seems to violence is to forgive and forget as vengeance can never bring peace and harmony. Nationalist thinker Ernest Renan in his essay "What is a nation?" states that the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things. No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale, or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century (Bhabha 11). Repetition of historical happenings revives the past wounds. Our father of nation Mahatma Gandhi's nationalism was inclusive of all castes and people. Dr. Radhakrishnan says in his essay "The Gandhian Outlook",

He took up the Indian cause, not out of any narrow patriotism, not only because he happened to belong to India, but because of his intense love for humanity and in order to enable humanity to adopt a different outlook, a different attitude with regard to the problems which faced humanity. In that sense he

was first and foremost an internationalist.

(Radhakrishnan 22)

Indian freedom was a result of that inclusive nation. Gandhiji's principle of non-violence seems greatly relevant in such scenarios where pogroms like Anti-Sikh riots happen. These narrow boundaries of religion and region don't bring people together instead divide them in small narrow sections of society. Internal war happened, as pointed out by C. Vijaysree in "Introduction" to *Nation in Imagination* may be because the nation was a rather loosely structured grid that kept different sections of the colonized

society together in their fight against the other- the colonial ruler- and it began to give way once the common cause of eliminating the 'other' was achieved.

Communal Violence creates a space of instability for women, whether, in the homeland or the diaspora, Leela loses her life to communal violence, while Bibiji and Nimmo suffer personal losses in the form of the deaths of their husbands and family. In all three situations, it is obvious that communal violence cuts through religious, class, and geographical locations and affects the lives of these three Indian women.

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