

Women on the Abyss: A Scrutiny of the Communal Victims in Anita Rau Badami's *Can You hear Nightbird Call?*

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Abstract

Writers of Indian diaspora unveil the unforgettable historical moments of their native country. They delineate the difficulties of split family members, especially children and women. Anita Rau Badami is one of the partition writers who explore the relationship between the political and the personal, how ordinary lives survive in extraordinary tragedies and what is survival in this context means. In the novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* She deeply discusses the results of partition, especially with particular reference to the women victims of communal violence which is one of the effects of partition. Badami unveils the difficulties of women victims who are imbued to physical and psychological violence. The present paper analyses how women are victimised in communal violence in Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

Key Words: Diaspora, Political, tragedies, communal violence, Partition, victims

Fictional works of the Indian diasporic writers delineate on the ongoing issues that create a cleavage in the annals of their native country. As these writers are nostalgic towards their own country, they try to interrogate the entire problems related to the emotional and sensitive issues that spoil the peace of the country. They seek to foreground the history of the untold sufferings, and they try their best to unveil the

difficulties of the people so that the future generations can lead a healthy life. Anita Rau Badami earnestly focuses the many challenges faced by the omen of various strata of the Indian society. In her novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) Badami focuses the aftermath effects of partition. In the novel, she points out how women suffer due to partition which is followed by abominable communal violence. The present paper analyses how women are the worst sufferers of sectarian violence in Badami's fiction *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

In her novels, Badami has showcased the difficulties of women who are imbibed to the communal violence: especially in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* She has attempted to focus on the partition era which ultimately results in violence and death of both Indians and the Pakistanis. According to her, this communal violence is an effect of the political forces which play in the so-called systems of caste, communalism and other influences like cultural influences that thoroughly affect the lives of ordinary citizens through the novel, Badami highlights the authorities in power-play power politics and are responsible for the violence that ultimately results in the destruction of the society which once has existed as a dominant society.

One of the significant aspects that focussed in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Is the victimisation of women due to communal violence? Women are extremely vulnerable and are the easy targets of discrimination, deprivation and are subjugated in the male-dominated society. Fiction related to partition focuses on how much women suffer due to India-Pakistan partition. Badami poignantly reflects how women are affected: raped, kidnapped, assaulted as well as forcibly impregnated by

men of other religion. To protect themselves from this evil practice, many omens both from the upper as well as the lower strata of the society, have taken crucial steps like jumping into the wells along with their children and also poison and opium were readily available to women to kill themselves along with their children.

The diasporic novelist, Badami, records the physical and psychological violence that is undergone by women during and after partition. She reflects the web of destruction through the portrayal of three generations of women namely Kanwar, Nimmo and Leela Bhat. With her uniqueness in her style of writing, in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Badami skilfully presents the brief scenario of violence and the aftermath of partition in a meticulous manner. The critic Alok Bhalla is of the view that, contrary to the communal histories, “the stories about the Partition have more to do with the actualities of human experience in barbaric times than with ideologies, and seem to be bound together by one common thread - they find the notion that there was always hatred between the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in ordinary life, completely incomprehensible” (14). In the novel Badami tactfully analyses the difficulties of women and how they become prey to the vicious passion of society.

Badami focuses the realities on how the women of pre-partition, as well as the post-partition period, have suffered both physically and psychologically in their lifetime. At the beginning of the novel Badami pictures the role of the politics-based religious society here the characters of her book are a part of it. The house of the protagonist Bibi-Ji is situated “One of a small cluster of Sikh and Hindu houses, it was separated from the Muslim homes by fields of swaying sugarcane” (*Can* 3). It is evident that before the partition of India and Pakistan, Muslims and Hindus were

living close to each other but, they are separated by sugarcane fields or some other barriers. Badami at this juncture unveils the idea that religious tolerance existed there in Punjab before partition. The novelist also gives evidence that Bibi-Ji secretly breaks the rules of her religion by cutting her hair to even them out. Bibi-Ji's husband Paji, even though he is a Sikh, he celebrates almost all festivals: “ He insisted on being multi-denominational as far as festivals went, and celebrated them all-Baisakhi, Diali, Eid, Hanukkah, Christmas” (Can 38). The above illustrations firmly illustrate the idea that people lives with harmony and are acutely aware of either the religious or cultural divide. Later when partition occurs all these tolerances and mutual acceptances are gone, but religious intolerance and violence creep in the psyche of the people and violence breaks out in various forms that ultimately ends with the suffering of women the society.

Women become prey to the violence and are afraid of the Partition before it is declared. In the novel, Badami writes how it is painful for the womenfolk to accept the effects of partition. Bibi-Ji's sister Kanwar in her letter to Bibi-Ji pours out her agony of how she suffering in her mind of the forthcoming separation. She writes: *“Ever since it was announced that there would 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”* (Can 44). Kanwar's letter proves that the people of Punjab do not like the Partition and they are unable to think the aftermath effects of Partition. She also confesses that she is psychologically unrest hen she hears about fight between the Sikhs and the Muslims. In another letter to her sister Bibi-Ji,

Kanwar clearly outlines her predicament and the ongoing unrest within her family circle. She writes:

“Last week there was a big fight between the Mussulmans and the Sikhs in Hazara district in north-west. . . . My husband’s cousin escaped with his life and is here with us now. He spends his days sharpening his kirpan and swearing that he will kill any Mussulman who crosses his path. Across our land, hearts are filling with anger and hate. . . . My husband has lived for ten years longer than I have on this earth, so perhaps he is wiser than I am. But I have a bad feeling about this Partition business. I am afraid.” (Can 49-50)

The above passage reflects the inner agony of Kanwar before partition, which makes her envision of what is going to come. The incidents that take place around her create her a situation of thinking about the pros and cons of partition.

Badami focuses on the pathetic impact of partition violence through innocent women characters. As per Kanwar’s perception, the violence perpetrated during Partition is massive and she cannot digest it as she is a part of it. The recollection of the memory about Nimmo projects the fact about Kanwar who falls prey to spreading violence. Even though Nimmo is a small girl, she is unable to forget how her mother is being raped and died. It seems very pathetic when Nimmo explains the rape and death of her mother. On a particular morning Nimmo’s mother came running into their house and locked the door. She lowers Nimmo into a sizeable wooden bharoli of grain in the dark corner of the house. The Nimmo hears “hears fists pounding on their door.

. . . the sound of footsteps entering the house and insistent male voices. Her mother's voice grew higher and angrier" (*Can* 154). Then she hears the pleading sound of her mother while she is in the bin. In the meantime, Nimmo is confronted with agony and panic, and she happens to eat few grains which "tasted like chalk and made her even more thirsty" (*Can* 156). When her mother opens the lid of the bin Nīmmo hardly recognises the "dirty, bleeding woman who wept with a soundless, juddering agony"(*Can* 156). Being the victim of great violence, Nimmo becomes an orphan and destitute. The death of Kanwar focuses the idea that ordinary men and women along with their children become a part of violence. It needs to be noticed that the agent of this extreme violence remains unnoticed and undisclosed. Nobody seems to be interested to know about to find out the rapist as it appeared that there is no purpose in identifying the instrument of collective consciousness except that it is a faceless, non-Sikh man.

Violence splits families as each member finds his/her way to escape from their tragic past. Like Nimmo, there are so many others who have lost their identity and their relations due to partition. Along with other people, Nimmo crosses over India to new Delhi: she joins herself with a Kafeela and walks for days with the "enormous ragged line of people, begging people for food and water"(*Can* 157). The riots that followed partition has made the people hapless victims, some of them escaped out of mere luck, but they have left everything they had. In the process of escaping from their native place, they are made for walking in a long column, trying to protect all they had in their lives. On their way they walked for days together and " passed burning villages that were unnaturally quiet, . . . She saw men weeping for their loses.

Bloated corpses floated in the canals that ran along the edges of the fields, and lost-eyed children like herself begged pitifully for food and water”(*Can* 157). Nimmo’s long journey ends in New Delhi in a vast village of tents and shacks-a refugee camp set up by the government of newborn India. Later she is adopted by a Sikh couple who have rescued her in the kafala. The long journey of Nimmo and the cruelties she has faced during her travel to Delhi attempts to show that what extent unexpected moments of life can play havoc in the lives of ordinary people including young children.

Women are often prey to the psychological victim, which almost convert them as disturbed persons until the end of their lives. Even after her marriage to Satpal, Nimmo is unable to forget what has happened to her when her mother is raped and attempted suicide. Always she finds herself in an uneventful existence as well as she is haunted with the “chalky taste of fear” that had clogged her throat since “her mother had thrust her into the wheat bin remained with her even now, when she as a grown woman with a family of her own” (*Can* 157). Nimmo is an orphan victim of partition and also a victim of the riot in 1984. Ironically she hears water running at night, and she is reminded of her mother’s furious washing, and sometimes her nostrils would fill with the smell of pale violet soap. Also Nimmo’s fear is monstrous, and also

. . . Silent thing that often woke her, sweating and shaking, from troubled sleep. It made her suspicious of everyone, even neighbours. . . . Who could she explain what it as like to have your life pulled out from under your feet, to wake up one day and find you have no family or home in the land your people had tilled for a hundred years?. . And as

much as she tried, Nimmo could not rid herself of the memory of a pair of feet dangling above a dusty floor, their clean pink soles smelling delicately of lavender soap. (*Can* 158-59)

What Badami tries to reflect is that children who are the victims of circumstances are affected psychologically, and they carry on these incidents in mind till the end of their life.

In the novel, Badami focuses the dehumanisation of women who are made scapegoat to sadism and misguided notions of warring communities during partition. The armed attack on the Golden Temple and the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards intensified the dislike of the Sikhs for the government. These incidents, in turn, trigger off the most savage rampage of Sikh massacre ever known. Nimmo expects violence that night, and she is awake all night, expecting violence to erupt out of darkness. Suddenly heard the sound of “scuffling feet outside, some yelling and then a knock on the door” (357) that makes her drag her daughter into the next room and locks her inside the cold metal cupboard. Unfortunately a group of agitators enters into the house despite the request of Nimmo “ ‘Brother, why are you doing this to us?’ . . . ‘We have been neighbours for so many years, tell these people e have nothing to hide, tell them. Please’ ” (359). Her repeated pleadings are left unanswered, but sooner they start destructing the things in the house. As the agitators couldn’t find the male members of the house, they take Nimmo outside the home and burnt all the clothes and textbooks of Nimmo’s children along with the cupboard here Kamal is kept. As soon as the men have gone, Nimmo enters into the house and tries her best to quench the fire. As she cannot extinguish the fire, she feels as if she were

mad and she frantically searches for the keys, but she could not find keys since they are stolen by the agitators. In the riot Nimmo has lost her son Pappu, her daughter Kamal and her beloved husband, Satpal. After losing everybody Nimmo is transformed into a living corpse, falling into the deep abyss of senselessness. Badami at this juncture stresses the idea that women become psychological victims when their family is destroyed. Till their death they remember the sad events in their mind, and it is a trajectory on their part which dooms themselves into the darkness forever.

In the novel, Badami highlights how a woman's life gets affected from the beginning of her life until her death. Badami's character Leela Bhat suffers in her childhood because of the interracial nuptials between a German woman called Rosa Schweers and Hari Shastri, a man of South Indian origin who are her parents. From her birth Leela is called "a half and half" (78). During her childhood Leela suffers a lot because of her parentage, as a grownup she suffers from lack of money, and finally she becomes a victim of confrontational politics between the Indian government and Sikh militants. Along with her husband and children Leela lives in Canada for some years. She plans to come to India for a short stay, but unfortunately she is a victim of 1985 Air India 182 Bombing. The critic Veena Das is of the view that "the emergence of a militant movement among Sikhs, born in India and among emigrant Sikhs is an important phenomenon" (176). Even though the planned terrorist attack by Sikh militants against the Air India flight represents an attack against the Indian state, the passengers who were mostly Canadians. Badami tries to point out the idea that innocent creatures like women always easily fall prey to the corrupted politics of society.

Communal violence creates a space of instability for women as they are torn apart by their loss as well as their weakness in life. In the novel, Badami points out how the ethnic and religious minorities in India, such as the Sikhs and Muslims, have experienced a sense of displacement and alienation due to the communal violence that targets and shatter their lives. Through the portrayal of her characters, Badami focuses the unforeseen and unexpected circumstances that forcibly drag the women characters into a circle of violence. In short Badami has written the novel with a vision that in future Indian women should be hailed high in all aspects of life and they should be freed from violence of any form that may shatter their lives.

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