

UNVEILING THE STRATUMS: WOMEN'S ORDEALS AND STRUGGLE FOR EXISTENCE IN ANITA RAU BADAMI'S *CAN YOU HEAR THE NIGHT BIRD CALL?*

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Abstract:

*The life of a woman is defined by the challenges she faces and the opportunities she receives in a society. The societal, political and economic pressures comprise the magnum battle field against which she is precisely fighting for her identity. Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006), is an ingenious picture of struggles of three marginalized woman Bibi-ji, Leela and Nimmo amid swiftly shifting personal, societal and political landscapes. Badami, by bringing to light the ordeal, anguish, and pain of her three main female protagonists, gives novel voice to women potential and consciousness. The present paper aims to explore what it means to be a woman and how she defines her existence by living on the boundaries of the humiliation, deprivation, migration and violence.*

Key Words: *Women's rights, struggle, ordeal, migration, strength.*

Introduction

The question of women's survival cannot be determined on the basis of a set of historical experiences only. It takes its foundation on an existential level also. The life of a woman is defined by the challenges she faces and the opportunities she receives in a society. The societal, political and economic pressures comprise the magnum battle field against which she is precisely fighting for her identity. Cynthia Tobias (2016) argues that each woman is a filled with convictions of steel, willing to take the lead when called upon to use her passion, courage and drive to withstand extraordinary conditions-even when her commitment requires a seemingly impossible mission”(5). The present paper aims to explore what it means to be a woman and how she defines her existence by living on the boundaries of the humiliation, deprivation, migration and violence. Virginia Woolf (1977) argues that a “woman's writing is always feminine; it cannot help being feminine; at its best it is most feminine; the only difficulty lies in defining what we mean by feminine” (164). The main objective of the paper is to get an insight into the multiple perspectives Anita R. Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* raise for woman cause. Badami is a Montreal based acclaimed novelist who is awarded with prestigious the Marian Engel Award for a woman writer. She, in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*(2006), presents an ingenious picture of struggles of three marginalized woman Bibi-ji, Leela and Nimmo amid swiftly shifting personal, societal and political landscapes. The paper suggests that Badami, by bringing to light the ordeal, anguish and pain of her three main female protagonists, gives novel voice to women potential and consciousness.

Gerda Lerner (1979) explicates the significance of probing the women's experience in its own provisions. Lerner believes that women have been missing out of history not because of the malevolence plans of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male-dominated provisions. In this way, she argues, we have failed to spot women and their activities, because we examine issues of history which are inappropriate to women. Lerner (1979) writes:

To rectify this, and to light up areas of historical darkness we must, for a time, focus on a woman-centered inquiry, considering the possibility of the existence of a female culture within the general culture shared by men and women. History must include an account of the female experience over time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women's past. This is the primary task of women's history. The central question it raises is: What would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define? (Lerner 39)

Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* becomes a testimonial to Gerda Lerner's observations. She shares her mission in an Interview. Badami's (2016) biggest challenge in writing this third novel was to keep "the history in backdrop, not letting it eat up the story. I wanted to humanize the facts, to give life and shape to the dry bones of history and to the randomness of reality" her women protagonists go through. Ami Sands Brodoff (2006) argues that this is a "novel where women are front and centre, transforming hardship and pain into potency" (1). The fates of Bibi-ji, Leela and Nimmo are tangled in personal and societal borders. Their victimized existence suffers from partition, violence, severance, migration and isolation from the beginning till the end. The souls of night birds Bibi-ji, Leela and Nimmo search for the way of their liberation, but at last the all pervasive gloom engulf their flights. The darkness of night persists in the form of the partition of Punjab through the division of India and Pakistan in 1947, the violent agitation for an independent Sikh state called Khalistan in 1980, to the explosion on the Air India flight in Canada. Nandi Bhatia and Anjali Gera Roy (2008) give the details that Partition of Indian in 1947 involved the force migration of about 12 million people, whereas, one million lives were lost "in riots and resulted in abduction of nearly 75,000 women" (3)

Bibiji, also called Sharanjeet Kaur, is the most gorgeous of the three heroines. But her fate could never favour her. She has been courageously bearing the ordeals of life since her childhood. Loss of father in tender age and abject poverty elude her dream for a contented and secure life. Her life is preordained to take to arduous domestic work where there is no "chance to sleep until the sun climbed into the sky?" (5). Badami (2006) writes:

But there was no help. Wake up, Wake up. This was her fate, written on her forehead by the gods, she thought unhappily, ... - it was her wretched fate to have to wake up and dip her hands in piles of excrement. Every morning since she was four years old, she had to start the day by picking up the hot stinking shit that the family's two cows dropped in the courtyard. Then she had to make balls of the disgusting mess and pat them into circular cakes against the walls of their house. And the smell- how the smell corrupted her waking hours and infected her dreams and ruined even her meals. This was what Sharan resented most of all, for she loved eating. Her joy at the sight of food turned even the simplest combination of rice and dal into a feast, but when she raised a morsel of food to her mouth she could only smell the overpowering odour that had written itself into her skin, instead of the fragrances of turmeric, fresh rice, butter melting on hot phulkas, green chillies frying (Badami 6).

Vrinda Nabar (1995) argues that "she has to learn quite early on that she is a second-class citizen even in her mother's home... It is she who is roped in to share the domestic chores" (Nabar 57). But, Sharanjeet/Bibiji's inner strength and determination keep alive her dream for a better existence. It was her father who had seeded the desire for wonderland Canada in her heart when she was barely six years old. She dreamed of it as a promised passage to her buried aspiration for a better prospect "like the mournful call of geese flying over fields" (23). This could be for her a gateway to a life full of magnificence and prosperity. The thought of Canada gave Sharanjeet/Bibi-ji an enchantment for magical land where contemplation could transform itself into reality.

Sharanjeet/Bibi-ji, as a child, had witnessed how her father had selfishly abandoned his family only to fulfill the unrealized dreams of a new life. The youthful and attractive Sharanjeet becomes the

living incarnation of her father's dream. Her romantic and ambitious ideology validates her every unfair action to achieve what she thinks she really deserves for. The opening sentence of the novel authenticates her inner passion: "Years before she stole her sister Kanwar's fate and sailed across the world from India to Canada, before she became Bibi-ji, she was Sharanjeet Kaur" (1). Bibiji's character appears to be the amalgamation of fragile human ethics, egotism and worldly ambition. Cynthia Tobias (2016) argues that strong will has a dark side, and when it takes the 'wrong turn, things can get ugly. Resourcefulness can turn into manipulation; creative solutions can become dishonest tactics; determination can present itself as purely stubborn pride" (4). Bibiji uses her physical beauty and grace to steal the heart of her sister Kanwar's fiancé because she thinks that "she was meant for better things" (21). She accompanies her husband to Canada, Vancouver, to settle her new cherished life. Their café becomes the focal point of the vivacious Indian community comprising Sikhs, Punjabis and even Pakistanis. Bibijidi's plays familiarized tendency of her youth even in her later years. She confirms her proficiency in taking the advantage of her beauty and wealth for her personal benefits, yet her inner consciousness is often obsessed by the wrong that she did to her own sister, Kunwar. Bibiji feels that she is childless because she has been punished for her sin. She is aware that it was "Ooper-Wallah's punishment. She had stolen a life and she would not be allowed to give birth to another" (45). Her inner realization becomes the mental ordeal for her luxurious existing. "Forgetfulness was good, said Bibi-ji. A bad memory was necessary for a person wishing to settle in, to become one of the crowd, to become an invisible minority" (136-7).

Leela Bhat, first her tenant and later her closest friend, is a woman much like Bibi-ji -- driven by dreams of success but, unlike Bibi-ji, frustrated in her ambitions. She longs for completeness in her life. Her mother is a German and father is an Indian. Leela faces the dishonor of being "a half-and-half." Her living 'in between' condition is very agonizing and marginalizing for her sensitive soul. Her childhood memories are marked by an isolating identity. In addition, she is the silent witness of the miserable condition of her mother, Rosa, in an Indian society. Her mother could never be an accepted member of her paternal family. She was always considered an outcast in their conservative Hindu folks. These racial and religious differences cast a deep impact on the psychology of poor Leela. Her identity was rootless and displaced in real sense. Badami(2006) sketches Leela's inner torment in these words:

She had once been Leela Shastri, the pale-eyed, thin daughter of Hari Shastri and Rosa Schweers, a half-and-half [Indian-German] hovering on the outskirts of their family's circle of love.(Badami 56)

Leela's gradually learns to accept the truth of her 'in-between' status. She comes out of her mother's shadow with novel realization that a new-fangled life awaits for her. Her search for belongingness and stability ends with her marriage to a Hindu Brahmin named Balu Bhat. This marriage gives her an established social status as a member of an imperative Brahmin family. When she moves to Canada with her husband, she is self-assured to "cut this New World into the shape she wished it to be . . . 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" (63). But she has the least realization that this new country will become a new home for her. "She had tried very hard to dislike Vancouver, to keep it at arm's length. And now ... she discovered that the city had stealthily insinuated itself into her mind and her heart" (79).

Bibi-ji's sister Kanwar was not fortunate enough to escape the pangs of life. Bibi-ji had not only stolen Kanwar's fiancé but her whole bliss. She becomes the silent victim of vicious cruelty and bloodshed of the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Her family is completely shattered in these riots. There is no information about Kanwar and her six-year-old daughter. Actually, Nimmo is found in Delhi later on. She is adopted and later marries Satpal, a mechanic. Although her life was never abundant with luxuries of life, yet her contended soul finds every reason to be happy and satisfied. On the other hand, Bibi-ji has no scarcity of resources. She has achieved what she desired in her life. But still her happiness is weighed down by the burden of her inner guilt and repentance. She has to pay the price of her sin by being childless. She

has left no reason to live for. Her restaurant called the Delhi Junction becomes the basis of her life. She tries to escape from the remorse of her hideous veracity of her past by channelizing her energy into making her restaurant the finest eatery cum community center for growing Vancouver Indo-Canadian community.

All these years, Bibi-jifruitlessly tries to find out about her sister Kanwar until one day, LeelaBhat gives her the information about Nimmo and her husband. It turns out that Nimmo, a gentle fearful woman trapped by the nightmares of her past is Bibi-ji's niece. She lives a modest middle-class life in Delhi, certain that disaster lies around the corner of every single day. Nimmo is the only member of Bibi-ji's family to survive to tell the tale the horrors of the Partition. Her single memory of her childhood that blazes unclear in her mind is that of her mother hiding her in a bin of grain just before their home is attacked by the mob. When she came out from the hiding place, she saw her dead mother's feet hovering above the floor. This atrocious memory of her childhood tortured her psychologically all her life. This hidden horror of her soul gripped her so badly that she could never enjoy a sound sleep. Her inner subconscious mind often made her distrustful of everyone. According to Butalia (2000), the past memories always leave a print in the subconscious mind of every individual which can be traceable with a cognizant effort (178-207). In Badami's novel, Nimmo has lost her whole family in the atrocities of partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. According to Veronique Dorais(2006), Badami writes with burning pen about the pain of piecing together one's past (214). Nimmo's past haunts her as its devastating memories are seeded deeper in her mind. She gets hallucinations of her past time spent with her mother. The nightbird of the novel's title is symbolic of Nimmo's inner tortured self whose voice remains gripped in dark fear of impending violence and loss what she faced in her childhood.

Above all this noise a bird sang deliriously, as if determined to drown it out. Perhaps it was the fabled nightbird, so sweet and unearthly was its singing. Nimmo had a vague memory of her mother telling her stories about this bird, whose song was a portent of ill luck. Or was it death?" (Badami 144).

Her life comes on the track again with her marriage to a young Sikh mechanic in Delhi. But still the horror of bloodshed, desertion and uncertainty keeps on pulsating in her heart beat. The circle of vindictive destiny reiterates again when she loses her husband and children in the anti-Sikh riots following Indira Gandhi's assassination in New Delhi. Sixteen-year old Sharanjeet Kaur, in 1935, achieves her heart's desire by stealing the future that might have been her sister's. In 1947, during the unimaginable violence of Partition, the reinvented Bibi-ji, wife of a wealthy Sikh immigrant in far-away Vancouver, discovers that nothing in life comes without its repercussions. What had seemed a small crime all those years ago returns to haunt her? When she finally finds her long-lost niece Nimmo in Delhi after nearly a quarter of a century of searching, Bibi-ji is ecstatic. Her selfish possessiveness and ambitious nature once again becomes discernible when Bibi-ji ingeniously forces Nimmo to send her son Jasbeer to Canada to live with her. Here, two hidden purposes are lurking in her heart. First, the company of Jasbeer could give her an escape from her old age loneliness and isolation. Secondly, she thinks that she can liberate herself of guilt by helping Nimmo's son in settling his career. She financially helps the family of Nimmo and eventually adopts Nimmo's son Jasbeer.

But fate and the politics of the Punjab intervene again. Nimmo's son Jasbeer does not feel mentally fit in an alien land Vancouver. His childish adamant behavior and bitterness become settled in his personality with the passage of time. This is perhaps the reason of his concern for the radical views of extremist preacher named Dr. Randhawa for a separate Sikh state, Khalistan. Bibi-ji is troubled by his involvement in the politics of another country but cannot bring herself to stop him. Five months later, in Delhi, the Indian Prime-Minister Indira Gandhi is assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards. This is followed by Sikh riots in India. The family of Nimmo is most affected in this bloodshed. Bibi-ji's husband Pa-ji is killed in the Golden temple in an operation by the Indian Army. Bibi-ji is completely traumatized by this incident. She "felt as if the world that she had known for so long, the stable, safe world, had been blown

apart, leaving only smoky puffs.” (375). The history of torture repeats itself again for Nimmo when she loses her husband, son and daughter in the violence of 1984 Sikh riots. She is “a woman damaged in places too private to see” (399). Leela Bhatt is never able to reach her home in India after eighteen years since her migration to Canada because she is one of those innocent passengers who boarded ill-fated Air-India Flight. Engulfed by sorrow and a corrosive, indiscriminate rage against all Hindus, Bibi-ji cuts off her long friendship with Leela Bhatt. Her unease over Pappu's involvement in anti-India activities turns to tacit support. Through him, she hears rumors of an impending crime, but so implacable is her anger that she refuses to warn anyone about it. It may not be wrong to notice that she was fuelling catastrophe. In an interview with Canadian Living, Badami (2016) shares her experience, “women never talk about getting back [home]. Instead they are focused on keeping their children safe, cooking their family's next meal, and picking up the pieces of their lives. Women are resilient.”

Badami's narrative power entwines the fate of these three heroines. The past plays a symbolic role in the lives of all these three women. The climax of the novel reminds the reverberations of violent past. The fierce cloud of violence in India spreads to the land of Canada and captures the lives of Badami's three heroines in its power again. Badami (2016) expounds that “readers feel the impact of history without having necessarily experienced it,” she says. “The story drags you in.” This is the real power of Badami's narrative. She compels us to believe, live and experience what her characters go through. Ingrid Ruthig (2016) argues that “even between family members there are reminders of the tenuous nature of all human relationships” (1). Ruthig gives the credit of novel's gripping realism to Badami's strength which lies in portraying individuals and their interactions. Ruthig (2016) asserts that “the tensions and emotional intensity she manages to build draw the reader into each of her characters' lives, so that we're better able to understand and empathise with all sides” (1).

Conclusion:

The pains, torments and emotional battles of Badami's three heroines, Bibi-ji, Nimmo and Leela Bhatt, appear to the reader a universal fight of survival of every individual woman. According to Veronique Dorais (2006), Badami's novel portrays the emotional intensity of her characters' lives, so that the reader should be able to recognize and identify with them. Dorais (2006) writes:

Although the novel is saturated in sadness and misfortune, Badami's raw language and evenhanded tone steer the story away from overwhelming drama and situate it within an honest reality. The originality of Badami's new novel does not reside in her portrayal of the horrific actions surrounding the political tensions in India, which in many ways echo Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*; the uniqueness of her story dwells in her focus on the effects of the events on Indian families in Canada. (Dorais 214)

This subtle harmonizing is no small accomplishment. Badami very aptly deals with the struggles of women who fight to save their identity with indomitable spirit and determination. If Bibi-ji defines her fight by her resistance to accept her destiny, the innocent Nimmo graciously displays her solace and contentment in depravity. Leela Bhatt battles all her life against the unfringeable status of her in-betweenness to achieve a stable identity. What is so unique in the struggles of these three heroines of Badami is that they symbolize the indomitable spirit of human nature. Although Bibi-ji, Nimmo and Leela Bhatt have their diverse aspirations, flaws, expectations, anxieties, apprehensions, determination and convictions, yet they emerge as sensible precursors of human vigor and potential.

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