MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN DIASPORA NOVEL: A CRITICAL STUDY

OF

CAN YOU HEAR THE NIGHTBIRD CALL? BY ANITA RAU BADAMI

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Abstract

Canada is a multicultural country. The country affirmed the value and dignity of all Canadian citizens regardless of their race, origin, language, or religion. Globalization has ushered the gateways for the students, tourist and intellectuals from developing countries especially from India to migrate and settle in Canada. Immigrants carry cultural baggage of homeland with them through their memory. They experience subaltern status in the host land and the writers of Diaspora gives voice to them.

Anita Rau Badami is an Indo-Canadian Diaspora writer. In her selected novel viz. Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?, she narrates the interweaving stories of three Indian women – Bibi-ji, Leela and Nimmo – each in search of a resting place amid rapidly changing personal and political landscapes in Canada and India. Indian representation viz. political condition in 1980s, Hindu-Shikh rift violence in 1984, the colonial set up, poverty stricken communities, patriarchal set up, socio-religious rituals etc. are portrayed through memory of the immigrants and their relatives. Canadian culture is both—a real hand experience by the immigrants as well as the myth/imagination of their relatives in India. Badami depicts cultures of both India and Canada; and their interface through memory and search for identity of the immigrants.

The novel will be evaluated from the cultural studies theory of Gayatri Spivak and Bakhtin’s, Chronotope. The memory and quest for the self enables to know about the differences between the cultures of India and Canada. It also helps to reassess the conventional ways of understanding society, economy and culture of both Canada and India for effective and long-standing partnership between two countries.

Key Words: Diaspora, Culture, Colonialism, Chronotope, Memory
Introduction

Ever since the existence of human being on the earth, one has to face problems of attachment to the homeland, voluntary or forced migration and thereafter, attempts for adaptation, assimilation. The movement of people across national borders, referred to as international migration, is viewed as “global challenge for the 21st century” (Martin 3). As emphasized by Croucher, migration “is a complex social, political and economic issue that poses numerous policy challenges for even the most democratic states” (Sahoo 1). The term Diaspora refers to the movement of any population sharing common ethnic identity that were either forced to leave from the nomadic culture or may be voluntary migration for better prospects and ultimately settling in a new geographic location. Today, Diaspora society has come to mean any sizeable community of a particular nation or region living outside its own country and sharing some common bonds that give them an ethnic identity and consequent bonding.

Multiculturalism policy of Canada affirmed the value and dignity of all Canadian citizens regardless of their race, origin, language, or religion. Liberal policy for immigrants has made it possible for a large number of Indians to settle in Canada. Immigrants carry cultural baggage of homeland with them through their memory. They experience subaltern status in the host land and the writers of Diaspora give voice to them. The paper focuses on the issue of memory and identity in Can You Hear the Nightbird Call? written by Indo-Canadian diaspora writer Anita Rau Badami.

Culture, Identity and Memory in Diaspora literature

Culture is a polysemic concept, it means different things to different people. The Oxford dictionary describes the term culture as “the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society” (“Culture”, Oxford). It is the way of life of a people, including their attitudes, values, beliefs, arts, sciences, modes of perception and habits of thought and activity. Culture’s growth, inheritance and transmission is through communication-in the form of language, symbols, literary and artistic forms. According to Bakhtin ‘Chronotope’ means “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”(84). Literature has emerged as a major area for Diaspora studies of homeland. Writers of Indian Diaspora assessing their culture and heritage according to their biases, successes and failures, celebrate and derogate Indian identity simultaneously, and end up with battling contradictions citing examples from society, culture and religion. Although fiction is not anyway just an extension of political theory, immigrant –writers, with their focus on India, primarily deal with the fiction caused by disparate cultures.

The question of cultural identity has begun to haunt the countries of the world today. But the word cultural identity has become heterogeneous and hybrid. Critic Stuart Hall says:
There are at least two different ways of thinking about ‘cultural identity’. The first position defines ‘cultural identity’ in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many others, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’ which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common… cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past… Cultural identities… undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play of history, culture and power’ (Chakravarty 79).

Immigrants after 1990s are less contained inside the physical and cultural boundaries of their host country than ever before. There is a travel to and from homelands and on-going communications with family and friends who remain there. Social networks promote and support immigration.

Anita Rau Badami is a writer of South Asian Diaspora living in Canada with a strong voice of the modern Indian Diaspora. Born in Rourkela, Odisha, India, she was educated at the University of Madras and Sophia College in Bombay. She emigrated to Canada in 1991, and earned an M.A. at the University of Calgary. Her novels deal with the complexities of Indian family life and with the cultural gap that emerges when Indians move to the west. The memory and quest for the self as reflected in the novels under study in the paper enable to know about the differences between the cultures of India and Canada. It also helps to reassess the conventional ways of understanding society, economy and culture of both Canada and India for effective and long-standing partnership between two countries.

**Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?**

Anita Rau Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* is the story of three women linked in love and tragedy over a long span of time. The novel begins with the time before the partition of India and Pakistan, and ends with the explosion of Air India flight 182 off the coast of Ireland in 1985. The novel provides kaleidoscopic picture of daily sights, culture and society of both India and Canada. Rau combines fictional world with real events. Her understanding of human relationships makes the novel a masterpiece of integrating the memories of the characters residing in India and Canada. The plot of the novel focuses on the effect of the partition on the Sikh community abroad, specifically the Sikh Diaspora in Canada. The situation of the motherland shaped the members of the community living in Canada, here Pa –ji and Bibi- ji who left undivided India before the Partition. The paper focuses how the past and present condition of homeland is narrated through memory and experience of characters. The Sikh community faces struggle for identity in India and their unrest lead to agitation for Khalistan – a separate land for them. Involvement of military in golden temple
and assassination of then Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi are narrated in the novel. In multi ethnic Canada the immigrants face issues of their identity.

**Reminiscences through history**

In the novel, historical and political events in India and Canada are narrated through different characters living in India and Canada, which keep their memory alive. The novel embodies some major events like the Komagata Maru incident (1914), the Partition of India (1947), the two Indo-Pak Wars (1965, 1971), imposition of a State of Emergency in India (1975), operation Bluestar (1984), the Assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1984), the Anti-Sikh Riots (1984), the Kanishka Aircrash (1985).

**Memory of Partition**

The partition is one of the most tragic events in the history of the world resulted into the loss of human lives and property. The partition leads to unnatural and forced migration of people. Horrific tales of massacres, rape, abduction of women and children etc. are associated with it. In the novel the people of Punjab were uprooted, leaving an impoverished culture behind them. Sikh religion, culture and history were closely linked to the Punjab. In the novel, the post partition events in the Punjab are narrated and the Sikhs were portrayed as included or excluded from the Hindus. About the Partition of India Kanwar writes to Bibi-ji in Canada: “Ever since it was announced that there will be a division of land between the Hindus and the Mussalmans, there has been unrest” (44). The partition of India has created rumors among the Indians living in Canada. “Rumours of fighting between Hindus and Sikhs on one side and Muslims on the other, of the beatings and rapes and killings accruing daily in the villages near the lines that had been so arbitrarily drawn across the country” (50). Violence erupts due to the political redrawing of borders.

Badami begins the novel mentioning how the houses of Hindu, Sikh and Muslims were located before partition. She mentions that the house of Bibi-ji was “One of a small cluster of Sikh and Hindu houses, it was separated from the Muslim homes by fields of swaying cane sugar” (3). This indicates that even before partition, Muslims and Hindus live close to each other yet separated by fields or some other barrier. Though Sikhs and Hindus live together as one, there is also awareness of the religious duties of one’s faith. Badami says about Bibi-ji or Sharan “As a Sikh she already knew she was not supposed to worship idols and stones and pictures, but her mother had said that gods from all religions were holy and it would not hurt to pray to them now and again” (8). Although the characters are conscious of their religion they live in harmony with other religions.
Identity in Canada

The writers of Diaspora depict the issue of identity. Here, it is clear that for the immigrants in Canada, religious dissimilarities are not powerful and dominant obligations. Sharan’s husband wants her to learn both English and Gurbaani. Also, Sharan secretly breaks the rules of her religion by cutting her hair to even them out. Laloo too rejects Sikh tradition despite Pa-ji’s objections; he cut his long hair and traded his turban for a hat. Pa-ji celebrates all festivals: “He insisted on being multi denominational as far as festivals went, and celebrated them all-Baisakhi, Diwali, Eid, Hanukkah, Christmas”(38). Characters are not so acutely aware of either the religious or cultural divide. There is a sense of sharing and community life in the initial phase. When Sharan and Laloo disregard the customs of their community, they experience a feeling of emancipation rather than the pressure on the mind of any guilt and consequent remorse. In Vancouver, Pa-ji accommodates people of his own and other faiths.

The longing for homeland and memory of the past get reflection in Diaspora text. Here, Pa-ji remembers his past and how he struggled to settle in Canada and so he treats younger immigrants to Canada as younger brothers. Also, Pa-ji and Bibi-ji run an open house for newcomers “Anyone was welcome: relatives, friends, refugees, children of friends on their way to somewhere else, they were all ushered in” (42). Pa-ji explains the reason for this: “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 own community to turn to” (47). He is happy that his religion is flourishing in many parts of the planet there. Speaking about the Indian diasporic community, Aparna Rayaprol states in “Religion is another identity marker that helps Indians to preserve their individual self-awareness and group cohesion” (Rayaprol 16). In the diasporic location of Canada, Pa-ji maintains ties with his Sikh associates in an effort to uphold the religious identity he shares with them.

In spite of the partition and consequent violence in India, Muslims immigrants in Canada like Hafeez Ali and his friend, Alibhai visits regularly the restaurant called ‘The Delhi Junction Café’ run by Pa-ji and Bibi-ji, home. Ajay Kumar Sahoo states “Food and cuisine form a significant feature of Indian identity in the Diaspora. One can easily locate an Indian restaurant in any major metropolitan city of Canada” (Sahoo 117). Common food habits play a major part in joining members of the sub continent in a fraternal bond. They meet regularly in the Indian restaurant and exchange pleasantries. Thus, the politics of the homeland is not so strong a force at least in Canada. The characters away from their homeland have feelings of dislocation, the pain of not being on native soil. The sense of common ethnic belonging surpasses any other feelings of ill-will because of religion or community.
The Hindu-Sikh unrest and its reflection in Canada

In the later part, the incidents that take place due to the politics of the time have an effect. The first war between the two newly formed nations is referred to: “In 1965, when war broke out between India and Pakistan, the battle came to ‘The Delhi Junction’ as well. The seating maps altered, and Hafeez and Alibhai moved defensively over to a separate table across the room from the Indian group” (66-67). Because of war between the two countries, the split consciousness that was fired with the partition travels all the way to far-off Canada to reach and divide them physically and mentally. For human being, the impact of any incidence is temporal and so when the war ended, Hafeez and Alibhai reappeared as if nothing had occurred.

Bibi-ji is generous and helpful to her Hindu tenant Leela but this friendship becomes sour as a consequence of political events. Veena Das says “The emergence of a militant movement among Sikhs, both in India and among emigrant Sikhs, is an important phenomenon” (Das 176). This important trend is depicted by Badami in her characters especially Bibi-ji. The same Bibi-ji who once thanked her stars for her Hindu friend, revises her opinion due to the effect of politics. Second, this also tells readers that politics not only cause a rift between different nations but internally within citizens of the same nation also. This time the Sikhs and Hindus are in opposition. The novelist utilizes the unique narrative style by depicting the present with the past, thereby awares the reader how the future depends on past political affairs.

Identity of the Sikh and the Khalistan movement

Identity has created many issues in the world. The Sikh in India found themselves alienated, not a part of majority Hindus in India and the government policy after independence made them conscious about it. There is a commencement of the rift between Sikhs and Hindus. Dr. Randhawa is a supporter of Khalistan, a separate country for the Sikhs. The demand for a separate country for the Sikhs is linked to feelings of pride in one's religion, ethnicity, language, and way of life for Dr Randhawa. Dr. Raghubir Randhawa is a Sikh scholar who has come to Canada from Southall, England. He is Pa-ji’s guest and has been invited to lecture at the Sikh temple. His communication is part of the political idiom being developed by the militant movement to create a politically active group and to forge an effective unity among his community against the Hindus. Religions and politics get intertwined and the desire for political power is cloaked in a religious garb. In the novel, Dr. Randhawa talks in terms of religious convictions. He says:

The Sikhs have been betrayed!”...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… and then by the Congress Brahmans, who gave the Musalmans their Pakistan and the Hindus their India but left the Sikhs to die in between; then by Nehru…and his winning
words…And we have been cheated again by the rose-wearing Brahman's daughter, Indira Gandhi who takes the wheat that we grow on our lands and distributes it to all of Hindustan, who diverts the water from our rivers to neighbouring states and leaves us with empty buckets. (252)

Dr Randhawa believes in centrality of territory as a means of preserving identity. He, wants the Sikhs to assume a singular identity that separates them from the others. Pa-ji, Bibi-ji and their friends in Canada are happy with multiple identities that encompass within it the identity of an Indian. Dr Randhawa supports for a separate state for Sikhs, Khalistan – the land for the Sikhs, the pure and the brave. The events in both countries mentioned in the novel helps to illuminate the effect of the home country upon the Diaspora. The break up involving Sikhs and Hindus in India divide the Sikhs and Hindus in the disporic location of Canada. About Bibi-ji, Badami says: “Over the next few days, she was increasingly conscious that the tension between the Sikhs and the rest of the Indian community already high after the invasion of the Golden Temple, was now closer to exploding. When Bibi-ji hears of the fate of Nimmo's family “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 of whispering poisonous rumours” (375). Revenge for actions in the native country is sought by the characters who are now residents of another country. The ties of communalism and religious concord are stronger than those of personal friendship. In the novel political events at home brings more closeness and power than any other medium like newscasts and historical texts. The novel reaches a devastating climax when the conflicts of the past erupt into the lives of all three women.

**Conclusion**

The novel under study portrays the issues of identity through memory of different characters residing in India and in Canada. The issues like settlement, political upheavals, partition of India, economic crisis, religious unrest etc are mentioned in the novels. As a writer of Indo-Canadian Diaspora, Badami puts forward these issues to the reader. Optimum efforts are required to be made to achieve harmony and peace between two nations.
Works Cited


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