
Socio Political Oppression and Emotional Turbulence in Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

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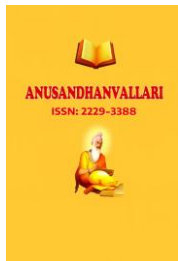
Abstract: Ours is a secular nation with a rich heritage and varied cultures. The unique pride of our nation is unity in diversity and the spirit of brotherhood that we exhibit to each other. In a pluralistic country as that of ours, where equality is applauded, oppression of any form would be devastating. Anita Rau Badami's novel *Can You Hear the Night bird Call*, throws light on this threat to secularism. The novel gives voice to the agony and cry of the Sikhs during a certain period in the history of India. It pictures the plight of individuals, whose fate is determined not by their deeds, but by the socio political happenings around them. Historic instances referred in the novel like the Partition of India, Golden Temple massacre, Assassination of Indira Gandhi, and Air India Bombing assert that, it is the society that inflicts havoc in the life of innocent individuals. The failure of *Komagata Maru*, has its impact in the life of Kanwar and Sharajeet Kaur. The chaos caused during the Partition of India, shatters the life of Nimmo and the fear of riots, continue to haunt her throughout her life. The Golden Temple massacre instils the pain of negligence in the mind of Sikhs. Assassination of Indira Gandhi, gives vent to ruthless massacre of innocents. Pathetically, the same plight befalls Nimmo for the second time. Hands that should have protected them turn to betray. Brutal fire of hatred engulfs her husband Satpal, her son Pappu and daughter Kamal. The pain and agony of loss infuses Jasbeer, who is a witness to all that happens around him. The novel concludes with Air India Bombing (1985), a tit for tat, in which everyone onboard is killed. Hatred, suppression and cornering could at anytime be a threat to secularism. Tolerance and respect for the other is the only way to make this world a better place to dwell in.

Keywords: Cornering, Minority, Secularism, Plurality, Multiplicity, Humiliation, Identity, Fear, Trauma, Loss, Hatred, Insecure, Faith, Neglect, Suppression, Tolerance

Full Paper:

Pluralism practiced in a democratic country gains admiration and esteem worldwide. Our country holds together people belonging to varied ethnic groups. A small turmoil could lead to a total collapse of the system. In such a vast pluralistic society, secularism becomes indispensable to retain peace and harmony.

When pluralism advocates multiplicity, there should never be a demarcation between the majority and the minority. Secularism should promote a secure sense of equality and oneness in the mind of individual



citizens. Failure to do so, is a failure to secularism. Anita Rau Badami's third novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, cries out the injustice deluged upon Sikhs during a certain period in the past.

Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?, is a historical novel that chronicles the happening from *Komagata Maru*, 1914 to the *Air India Flight 182* bombing in 1985. The novel touches upon various issues that had created waves of upheavals in the lives of Sikhs during a span of seventy years. The novel is a mix of history and fiction. The issues and the happenings in the novel are historically and chronologically pinned. Vast reading of Sikh issues and having been the direct witness of the horrors of the riots have helped Badami to spin a story packed with true emotions. Tragically, the destiny of characters in this novel is fixed not by their individual deeds but by the sociopolitical happening around them.

The novel begins in Panjaur before partition and proceeds with the happenings in Daurikalan, Punjab, Delhi and Vancouver. It is a story of victimization and pain of loss in the life of three women – Sharanjeet, Nimmo and Leela which is beyond repair. The happenings in India have been paralleled with the happenings in Canada.

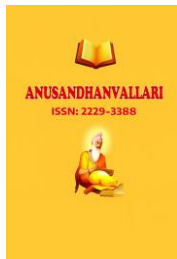
Sharanjeet and Kanwar lead a simple, harmonious rustic life until one fine day, when their frustrated father, Harjot Singh, disappears from home. *Komagata Maru* has caused a catastrophe in Sharanjeet's house, compelling her mother to bring up two girl children single handed. "She hated this ship that had caused the disappointment clogging her father's heart that had snatched his dreams away..." (11). The unfulfilled dreams of her father and the desire to travel to distant lands, make Sharanjeet to grab the opportunity of marrying Kushwanth Singh, the proprietor of "East India Foods" in Canada.

Badami's parallel narration mirrors how happenings in one's mother land create momentous change in the behavioural attitude of the citizens around the world. *The Delhi Junction* restaurant run by Pa-ji and Bibi-ji in Canada is a replica of Indian society. Political happenings in India bring in drastic change in the demeanor of the customers, who represent different parts of India, Hafeez and Alibhai from Pakistan, Dr. Nuyunmadar, a Bengali, Menon, a Malayali, Harish Shah a Gujarathi, Balu from South India.

"In the early years of the restaurants' life, the Indians and the Pakistanis had sat hunched around the same table, fueling their conversations with Samosas and endless cups of boiling sugary Chai tinged with ginger and Cardomom discussing their lives, their families cricket matches, their work and most of all the politics of their country of origin. A taut rope tied them to "home" whether India or Pakistan" (65).

Talk of partition brings panic in the mind of people living in most parts of Punjab, even before it actually happens. Kanwar's husband Pardeep Singh firmly believed that such fears were unnecessary because he had lived in Dauri Kalan from his birth. He believes that brothers of other religion would protect them from any mishap. Kanwar's last letter to her sister premonitions the danger that was fast approaching. "*Across our land, hearts are filling with anger and hate. So far there is calm here in Dauri Kalan, but hate is like an infectious disease, it can become plague very soon if something is not done to stop it... I have a bad feeling about Partition business. I am afraid*" (50).

Kanwar's fear comes true. Dauri Kalan had vanished without any trace. All the men in her family had been slaughtered. Kanwar is abducted and she dies leaving Nimmo her five year old daughter, to witness the cruel happenings that follow. "She picked up Nimmo and lowered her gently in to the large wooden bharoli of grain that sat in a dark corner of the house." (154) All that Nimmo could remember is the 'dying-dog sound' of her mother and "the pair of feet dangling above a dusty floor" (159), the unshared secrets buried deep in to her heart. "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, no home in the land your people have tilled for hundred years?" (159), Nimmo tries to put the shattered pieces together to make out the story of her past. It is the postcard tugged in to



her dress by her mother that helps Nimmo to connect herself to her aunt in Canada after many years. As M.S.Saharan records, “Many refugees overcame the trauma of poverty, though the loss of a homeland had had a deeper and lasting effect...” (MIH ,284).

Nimmo is adopted by a Sikh couple and they give her in marriage at the age of 18, to Satpal, a mechanic in Delhi. Even after many years the psychological trauma and fear of loss continues to haunt Nimmo. Satpal’s effort to link Nimmo to her past and Bibi-ji’s dream to get connected to her niece come true. Destiny connects them through Leela, who travels from Delhi to Vancouver.

Pa-ji and Bibi-ji have been leading a successful life in Vancouver for a few decades now. They continue to be guardians and well-wishers of immigrants from all over India. Leela from Bangalore adds up to the immigrant group. Bibi-ji is shocked to find the vehement refusal of Leela to visit Mrs. Wu’s shop. Her prejudiced view about the Chinese creates an aversion towards Mrs. Wu. Bibi-ji’s valuable words ease the attitude of Leela.

“The Chinese, the Japanese, the Italians that barber Masjid, you and me ... in this country we are all in the same boat “The Minority Boat” a leaky thing – could go down any minute if your don’t watch out... Make sure it does not drown you.” (137) this statement is applicable to our nation as a whole. Leela realizes the uncertainty of life. Things could turn topsy-turvy any moment. One in the top order line could become insignificant the next moment. Leela, who has so far perceived herself as “Well-known Bhats, from Bangalore is now ‘a minority lumped together with an assortment of other minorities” (137).

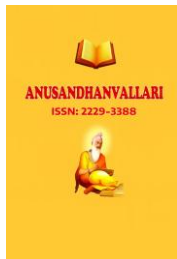
Bibi-ji reaches out to Nimmo, who leads an ordinary life in a small house in Delhi. Hoping to share the burden of Nimmo, who is now a mother of three kids, Bibi-ji plans to be the caretaker of the eldest son, Jasbeer. The feel of neglect both as a son and as a Sikh gets deep rooted in Jasbeer. It gets reflected in his anger towards his parents in the beginning and later turns out to be anger towards the motherland.

Jasbeer grows up listening to the ancestral past created by Pa-ji. Stories and pictures of brave warriors instill courage in the boy. When he is bullied at school, he carries a kirpan to show off his courage. Bullying and cornering instigates rebellious in him even as a child. When Jasbeer finds it difficult to blend with the other children, Bibi-ji thinks of cutting short the hair, which is the identity of a Sikh. “Should she ask Nimmo whether they could cut out his hair – the maker of Sikh identity- so many other Sikh parents in their community had done for their sons – so that Jasbeer could blend in.” (197) it is sarcastic that, to blend with the other and to be accepted, one has to lose his own identity. Towards the end, we find that it is this hair, the identity that costs the life of Satpal, Pappu and many others.

The political happenings in the early 1970s create unrest and agitation in the minds of youngsters like Sunny, who is usually observed to be very calm.

“She takes away our river water and gives it to Rajasthan, she cuts up Punjab and creates Haryana for the Hindus and now she is planning to give them Chandigarh as well. That city belongs to Punjab. First it was Partition and half of our land disappeared. Now our own leaders are chopping it up like a piece of meat. How much more are we supposed to give away? Without Punjab this country would be starving and look how we are treated – like step children! Is it fair?” (220).

But these political issues never belittle the admiration Nimmo has for the leader. Even when there are signs of unrest, Nimmo manages never to miss an opportunity to listen to Indira. “If something happens we can run out fast and police will be nearby too.” (224) Hoping that it is her own country and she would be safe guarded, this innocuous woman is trampled to dust for the second time.



The flame of agitation in the minds of youth is fanned by extremists Dr. Raghubir Randhawa. When he visits Canada for the first time, he hardly could impress five listeners with non-stop pompous talk about Khalistan. Though the elderly are for peace, oneness and harmony, Jasbeer begins to probe in to vicious words like: “conquest and betrayal and revenge.” (253) Nine years later the same man is received by an applauding audience. “Pa-ji was taken aback by the reception though he was aware that the mood of Sikhs in the community had changed in the nine years between Randhawa’s last visit and this one.” (278)

Jasbeer as a young man of twenty and a drop out from the school turns to be more conservative, rebellious and religious. He puts on a black turban and plans to join a religious school in Bhinder. Chaos created during the emergency period gives the extremists a chance to trap the youngsters in the name of faith. Very late on 22nd July 1979 Mrs. Gandhi reports to the Rajyasabha on the decision about emergency, “I do admit that had I taken actions earlier it would have been less drastic action” (NHI ,398).

Nimmo, who has earlier been a prey to upheavals, begins to lose her trust both in the nation and the people around. The nation fails to give her a secured feel. “Quickly, fear had sneaked in to their small peaceful world, Nimmo thought. How fragile her safety.” (275) As referred by Amaury de Riencourt in *The Soul of India*,

“Sikh agitation increased steadily in the first half of 1984, compelling the central government to declare a curfew, suspend rail and road traffic in to and out of Punjab, and send in the army. A few days later the army stormed the Golden Temple, with great lose of life” (380).

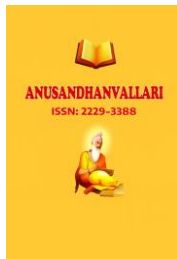
Unaware of the brooding hidden tug-war between the state and the religion, Pa-ji and Bibi-ji plan to visit the Golden Temple to take part in the 100th anniversary celebration of Martyrdom of Guru Arjun Dev. They are warned by Balraj, “In this country a breeze can change in to a storm before you end a sneeze!” (315) the real situation there makes Bibi-ji, a strong supporter of Indira, to comment, “What kind of government would send an army inside a temple, Pa-ji? Is this Mrs. Gandhi truly mad?” (331).

Opinions vary with the kind of experience an individual faces in life. The lady who has a strong faith in the unity and secularism of a nation loses her hope when, “Another shot rang out, Bibi-ji saw her husband fall forward as if someone had slammed him hard form behind.” (334) Pa-ji falls a prey with thousands of other innocent pilgrims.

“A knife in the heart. A dagger in the back. An insult. An outrage. Shock, then anger, spread across the world like acid burning in the soul of every Sikh, turning even moderate, temple once-in-a-while worshippers in to true believers... The library had been consumed by flames; centuries old sacred manuscripts had been destroyed. Pilgrims had been killed” (335).

Perceptions begin to alter, Bibi-ji who had once hated the propaganda of dividing the nation, participates in a rally demanding Khalistan. Laloo begins to grow his hair and dress up like a true Sikh. *The Delhi Junction*, which had been once a place of harmony splits up with contradictions. “*Us and Them*. When did we split in to these groups?” (341) Personal loss inflicted by wrong decisions taken by the state instills a strong feel of insecurity and neglect. Bibi-ji who had so long upheld the spirit of oneness feels defeated, “He had been right after all. The Indians had humiliated the Sikhs and they had killed her husband” (343).

Stronger anxiety is experienced by Nimmo and her family in Delhi when they hear news about assassination of Indira Gandhi by two of her Sikh guards. Nimmo’s secured nest begins to crumble. “Nimmo rushes in to her house, the black dog of fear that had stayed low for so long rearing up again, full-grown and monstrous.” (349) Life comes to a full circle, unfortunately for this poor mother Nimmo, it begins with loss and



ends with a greater loss. Nimmo wanted to cry, “*You can lose everything in one single day, your past, your present and your future.*” (350)

Nimmo wants to be more cautious, she didn’t want to lose anything again. Though there was no bharoli to hide her child in, she thought that the metal cupboard would be a safer place. she locks Kamal in to it. This time the intruders were people known to her. More cruelly, they set the room in fire which Nimmo did not expect, “A strong smell of kerosene filled the room mixed with the odour of smoke. In the centre of the fire stood the steel cupboard... The bastards have stolen the keys. The murderers, the bastard murderers.” (361)

Pappu, Nimmo’s second son also meets with the same plight for no fault of his. He takes shelter in Mohan Lal’s house. He hides in the bathroom due to fear of death, “He removed his turban and unbound his hair. Gripping the razor, he started sawing chumps of hair, cursing its thickness.” (365) His religious identity turns out to be a curse, “Laughing they dragged Pappu out in to the silent gully. One of the men jammed a car tire down his body, pinning his arms to his sides, poured kerosene over him and flicked a match, setting him alight.” (368) The same brutality is executed on Satpal, who is caught up in Modi nagar. He seeks the police for help and later realizes that they too have a secret hand in the sport. The ruthless brutes make fun of his pleads, “I have children, I have a wife, I voted for Indira-ji. Please, he folded his palms and fell to his knees. I didn’t do anything brothers.” (370) But the heartless killers humiliate him and set him ablaze.

Everything was over just within a span of a day. One such incident witnessed by the author during the same Delhi riots has taken shape as a novel after two decades. “More than two decades later the Justice Nanavati Commission report has revealed that only one police official.. was convicted in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots in which more than 3,000 Sikhas were killed in Delhi alone... Interestingly, cases against 14 police officials could not be proceeded with as “files were untraced.”

- *The Tribune* (India), August 9, 2005

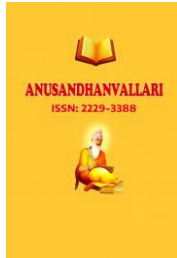
Political issues might get sorted out but the loss it inflicts in the lives of individuals is beyond repair. Hatred is like a plague, it engulfs mercilessly without any rational thinking. As an act of revenge within a span of six months *Air India Flight 182* is bombed killing all 329 people on board.

The hatred breeds more hatred. The savage onslaught inflicted on dear and near ones generates an everlasting scar in the minds of the victimized. Bibi-ji who is portrayed as a caretaker of new immigrants finally turns out to be insensitive to the plight of others. Bibi-ji is hinted about the sabotage of *Air India Flight 172*, the concealed hatred in the Bibi-ji, stops her from warning Leela, “But, it was none of her business what happened to them.” (383) having been exposed to extreme torment not once but twice in her life, Nimmo becomes insensitive to the miseries of others, “But why should she, Nirmaljeet Kaur, care? The world is full of news. She too was news in November 1984.” (400)

Badami ends the novel with a positive note. Jasbeer in his last letter to Preethi regrets, and recalls the days they had celebrated Halloween and then confesses,

“We were dressed as monsters but we were only children. Now I am no longer a child but in last few years I had become a monster... Trick or Treat I wanted to say, Trick or Treat. Not that the person who opened the door had choice. I expected a gift of money of gold. Both would be used to buy us food and more guns and grenades. This was how we found the means for a free country... I was sick of violence and the killing” (397).

Finally after an year of imprisonment Jasbeer returns back to his mother in Delhi, but this time not with a black turban, “A tall man with a grey beard and light blue turban walks slowly down the dark gully.” (401)



Hatred, suppression and cornering could at anytime be a threat to Secularism. Ours is a land of diverse faiths. Secularism in the constitution at a superficial level can never bind people together. It should be advocated at all levels and should be practiced from within. As Rajeev Bhargava in his article “The Future of Indian Secularism” points out, “The constitutional secularism cannot be sustained by governments alone but requires collective commitment from an impartial judiciary, a scrupulous media, civil society activists and an adult citizenry.” – *The Hindu* 12th August 2020. Tolerance and respect for the other is the only way to make the world a better place to live in.

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