

Rewriting The Past: Historiographic Metafiction In Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear The Nightbird Call*

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Abstract

This Paper examines Anita Rau Badami's Can You Hear the Nightbird Call as a work of Historiographic metafiction that interrogates the subtle narratives of partition, 1984 anti-Sikh riots and Indo-Canadian experience. A novel apart from being a representational genre also is an effective and powerful mode of discourse. Negotiations between history and novel are more frequent as compared with other modes of fiction. Novel has become an important medium of problematizing and questioning to a certain extent the discourse of history. . In historical fiction, writers attempted to write undisclosed and concealed chapters of Indian history keeping an alternative perspective towards history with a direct reference to politics, state and nation, Based on Linda Hutcheon 's concept of historiographic metafiction, the paper argues that the novel does not merely recount of historical events but subtly interrogates how histories are constructed, remembered and embodied thereby positioning memory as a critical tool for reimagining historiography through the principal characters like Bibi-ji, Leela and Nimmo. Badami thereby foregrounds how the past operates both as a site of trauma and also positioning memory as vital element for reimagining historiography.

Keywords: Trauma Narratives, Multiculturalism, Partition Narratives, Indian Diaspora, Historiography, Cultural Studies, Feminism.

Introduction

Anita Rau Badami, a distinguished diasporic writer, explores the emotional and cultural complexities of women's lives in her novels within the framework of multicultural society. Her tragic tale, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* talks in detail the cultural and social restrictions faced by the women characters navigating two distinct cultures, namely Indian and Canadian. The whole story is about the lives of three strong and resilient women over the span of five decades, tracing their personal journeys and evolving identities as they are shaped by both countries. Badami skilfully blends fiction with historical reality capturing the devastating personal impact of the major political events such as Partition of India, the Emergency period, Operation Blue Star in 1984, Indira Gandhi's assassination and the subsequent massacre of innocent Sikhs, and the bombing of Kanishka in 1985 with the fictitious narrative. These events create deep turmoil in the lives of the characters, highlighting the profound impact of religious intolerance, violence and displacement. Through this narrative, Badami examines the intersection of personal identity, cultural dislocation and historical trauma.

The novel exemplifies how diasporic fiction can function as a form of historiographic reimagination. By positioning the novel within the framework of diasporic historiographic fiction, the text highlights the affective dimensions of loss, memory and identity. The novel is a complex narrative addressing historical trauma and memory, using the symbol of the night bird's call to represent freedom, hope, and cultural heritage. The characters in this story navigate their hybrid identities and the impact of political events on their lives. It also discusses broader themes of existential rootlessness, alienation, and the quest for identity that are common in diasporic literature.

Review of Literature

Much criticism positions the novel within postcolonial Literature on Partition and its devastating effects on the characters. Scholars observe that Badami situates Individual experiences within the larger processes of decolonization, showing how the collapse of colonial authority and the formation of new nation- states reshape identity, community, and belonging. Besides, the novel also throws light on paradigms from trauma and memory studies, illustrating how personal and inherited memories reinforce the emotional and historical depth of narratives surrounding partition and communal violence. Homi Bhabha's Hybridity, Mimicry, Third Space is quite relevant in analyzing colonial discourses, stereotypes and cultural representation in Indian Diasporic literature. Also it provides a space for negotiating multiple cultural identities. Hirsch's Postmemory is highly pertinent as it talks about the study of intergenerational trauma in Partition literature, especially for authors writing from the diaspora.

The concept of postmemory helps Badami to demonstrate how trauma survives beyond the original victims and shapes diasporic identities across generations. The novel's depiction of intergenerational storytelling, silence, and cultural memory aligns with Hirsch's idea that later generations experience inherited trauma deeply that it becomes part of their own identity. Trauma does not remain in the past- it circulates, repeats, and reappears in new forms. The novel therefore operates as a narrative of postmemory, showing how history continues to haunt the characters.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, literary analysis grounded in historio graphic metafiction theory as advocated by Linda Hutcheon. It also sheds light on Post-Colonial theorists like Homi Bhabha and Gayathri Spivak to understand the issues of memory, trauma, and displacement. A close reading of the novel is done to identify metafictional devices such as narrative layering, temporal disruptions and representations of historical events. These interpretations help the writer to reconstruct or interrogate historical events through narrative strategies, emphasizing the interplay between fiction and history.

Results

The novel reveals several features that can be identified as a work of historiographic metafiction. The analysis shows that Badami merges documented historical events like Partition, the Emergency, anti-sikh riots, and the Air- India Flight182 bombing with fictional narratives to highlight the fragmented subjective nature of memory. The characters like Leela and Jasbeer occupy in between spaces illustrating Homi Bhabha's concept of polarity. The 'politics of polarity' signals how hybrid identities can kindle emotional and political conflict in this novel.

Discussion

Sharanjeet Kaur or Bibi-ji, one of the protagonists, is the wife of Pa-ji, a rich Punjabi businessman in Vancouver. Bibi-ji, born in remote Punjabi village steals her sister, Kanwar's destiny by marrying Pa-ji and thereby gaining passage to Canada. While Bibi-ji gains access to a life of luxury in Canada, her sister, Kanwar is left behind to face the brutal violence of the partition of India and Pakistan. She disappears leaving

Bibi-ji bereft and guilt-ridden. She feels very unhappy because she is unable to have a child. She starts a restaurant called 'Delhi function' which becomes a comfortable place for the Indo Canadian community to spend a happy time there. Both Pa-ji and Bibi-ji welcome all kinds of Indians to Canada, not just Sikhs. This is how Leela Bhat, becomes her closest friend in Vancouver.

Leela Bhatt is born to a German mother and a Hindu father and leads a very unhappy life in Bangalore. After her mother's death, Leela learns to deal with her in-between status and marries Balu Bhatt who insists on immigrating to Canada. Through Leela, Bibi-ji finds her niece, Nimmo, whom she had lost connections long ago. She now comes to Delhi and persuades Nimmo to let her bring up older son, Jasbeer, to return to Canada with her. By spending money on the boy, Bibi-ji believes that she can overcome her guilt. But Jasbeer does not settle well in Vancouver and finds himself more comfortable with the stories of Sikh ancestry narrated by Pa-ji. Later in June 1984, Bibi-ji and Pa-ji decide to make their annual pilgrimage to the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The moment they move in, the temple is stormed by Indian Government troops as directed by the Prime Minister of India. Pa-ji gets killed there.

Bibi-ji is completely shattered and she returns to Canada where she finds Jasbeer being involved in the politics of native land. Then in October 1984, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was murdered by two Sikh bodyguards. The assassination sets off a wave of violence. As a result, Nimmo loses her husband and innocent child. Back in Canada, Bibi-ji cannot prevent Jasbeer's anti-India activities and through him she hears the rumour of an impending danger but unable to find the ways to stop it. The repercussions of this incident followed and it ended up with the bombing of Air India Flight in June 1985 in which Leela Bhatt dies. Bibi-ji engulfed by sorrow and miseries, decides to settle in Canada feeling remorse for the death of her dear ones. Badami by combining the historical and realistic elements, she powerfully portrays the trauma and document the experiences of ordinary people whose lives are affected by the tragic events.

The intersection of historiography and diasporic literature has been richly explored in postcolonial theory, particularly in how narrative strategies are used to contest dominant histories and reclaim marginalized voices. The novel foreshadows more theoretical insights from scholars such as Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Linda Hutcheon, In fact Badami reconstructs history not through official records but through subjective, emotional, and fragmented recollections which is central to historiographic metafiction. In this regard, Badami's narrative destabilizes the boundaries between history and fiction.

Linda Hutcheon's concept of 'historiographic metafiction' is especially relevant in this context. According to Hutcheon, such fiction self-consciously reminds us that history and fiction are two different discourses, and both combine to represent systems of signification. The historical events mentioned in the novel are important because they raise questions about the place of South Asian community within the Canadian multicultural setup. By foregrounding cultural conflicts and religious upheaval, Badami has skillfully adds to the genre of historiographic fiction. She does not indulge in rewriting the history but adds known pieces of world history to her story. She knows how these are not only relevant to Canadians of migratory background, but shows how they rightfully belong within the national historical frame of Canada.

Badami's narrative resists linear, official versions of history. Instead, it presents 'personal testimonies' that blur the line between memory and history. The trauma of Partition is reflected as trauma of 'separation and longing'. Orphaned by the Partition violence, Nimmo or Nirmaljeet Kaur is adopted by a Sikh family. Nirmaljeet is educated and married to Satpal Singh. She settles for a life of domesticity, like her mother, in her marital home in Delhi, mothering three children- two sons and a daughter, Kamal. But the religion which she had inherited from her parents, devastates her life in the anti-Sikh riots, that in turn infuriates the capital after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination. Nirmaljeet, assailed by memories of her childhood, of a similar attack braces to save herself and her daughter. "Unlike her mother, she was prepared" (357), as she arms herself with an iron rod and hides her daughter in a steel cupboard, locks it and places the key into a "bowl full of other keys" (357).

When the rioters arrive looking for men in the house, she puts up a valiant front, attacks and injures one of the intruders, but is soon overpowered, only to find her house set ablaze. A distraught Nimmo rushes into her house to unlock the cupboard and save her daughter, only to find that the attackers had taken away the bowl of keys. “Inside the steel cupboard, the safest place- she is there, my little daughter”, wailed Nimmo. Nobody can touch her there” (362). “It was the last safe place in the world, that bin of grain, stay there my daughter, stay there, you will be safe. Don’t make a noise or they will get you’.(361). Bedeviled by religion, class and gender Nimmo’s efforts to save her daughter’s life prove futile. Her mother Kanwar had lost her life, but had managed to save Nimmo’s life, by hiding her in a bin of grain. All these instances in the novel historicize Partition through personal pain showing how memory itself becomes the site of historical reconstruction.

On a deeper level the novel shows how women who are extremely vulnerable are easy targets of any form of oppression, violence, humiliation, deprivation, and discrimination. It interrogates the effect of political events in the home country and their effect on the actions of people living in Canada. The novel promotes the idea of a globe where everyone is connected and teaches that collective violence spreads globally so that everyone gets hurt. The story not only follows the lives of three women and their families across fifty years and two continents, but also revolves around the strength of these three women characters. Badami’s delineation of female trauma as a result of these events in the context of India and Canada shows how violence and trauma travel across national borders. These three women remember the trauma in order to forget it which is necessary for their healing. Badami uses shifting perspective among these three women to construct a plural and contradictory history.

The life of characters has been destined by the political incidents. In this novel, Indira Gandhi delivers a speech in public and Nimmo hears it. Nimmo is inspired by Mrs. Gandhi as she finds a role model in her life. “Strength, conviction, persistence” are qualities which Nimmo wants to inculcate from the leader. Unlike Nimmo, Satpal shares a troubled history as he complains to Nimmo:

All these politicians play games with us and we, like fools, keep voting for them again and again. She takes away our river water and gives it to Rajasthan, she cuts up Punjab and creates a 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 stepchildren! Is it fair? (Badami 2006, 220)

Through Bibi-Ji’s life in Canada, the writer connects diasporic nostalgia to historical loss. The novel portrays diaspora as a space of historical community, where migrants carry their inherited memories, keeping alive & recreating history across the boundaries. In Canada, Bibi-ji tries to bring all the Sikh migrants together and wishes to see a unified community. She makes use of her Delhi Junction Cafe to offer free counselling to new immigrants and brings about a feeling of a unified community where everyone is treated as equals. By this way, Bibi-ji creates a sense of security and certainty in the minds of immigrants.

A major change occurs in her life when her husband gets killed in Amritsar. In 1984, Bibi-ji and Pa-ji decide to make their annual pilgrimage to the golden temple in Amritsar, the holiest of Sikh Shrines. While are in the temple, it is stormed by Indian government troops in an attempt to find out the Sikh extremists who are hiding inside the temple. But unfortunately several innocent people dies and Pa-ji is one of them. Bibi-ji is completely shattered but still life has to move on. She returns to Canada and develops a sense of revenge. She even joins other members of the Sikh community in a rally against the Indian Commission in Vancouver. She feels that the government of India had gone wrong. She tells everyone that she wish to join the rally conducted by the Sikhs in Canada. She reveals her opinion that:

The Indians had humiliated the Sikhs and they had killed her Pa-ji. It was now a question of defending the faith, the thing that gave them, as a trifle, a face and a distinction. Now large meetings were held at the Taj Mahal every day. Bibi-ji did not know many of the people who attended, and after a while she stopped trying to remember their names. Talk of revenge and of Khalistan whipped around like a bitter wind, fuelled by the arrival of yet more people from Punjab. (Can You Hear the Nightbird Call? 343)

Badami transforms the real historical event like Air India Bombing into a symbolic closure of generational trauma illustrating how fiction self-consciously reinterprets history. By centering women's domestic and emotional lives, the story offers a space for a historical witnessing where women preserve collective memory through everyday endurance.

Conclusion

The novel in short blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, memory and history. Badami through this story seems to say that the endless cycle of revenge and retaliation is counter-productive, that it will only lead to more violence and more bloodshed. Lesson must be learnt from all these incidents from history as it is essential to live a peaceful life. Reinterpreting past events allows the writer to reflect on current socio-political realities, showing how history continues to influence present identities and conflicts. Badami by blending historical facts with imagined experiences seems to question how history is itself written and remembered.

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