

A STUDY OF PARTITION NOVELS OF ANITA RAU BADAMI'S "CAN YOU HEAR THE NIGHTBIRD CALL? ANDBAPSIDHWA'S ICE-CANDY-MAN"

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Abstract:

This paper critically analyzes the partition fictions of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* and Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*. Bapsi Sidhwa received several awards including the Lila Wallace Readers' Digest Writers' Award and the Li Beraturepre is from Germany for the Novel *Ice-Candy-Man*. *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* is a noteworthy work done by Anita Rau Badami which made her a celebrity at the international platform. Towing high among the other authors, Bapsi and Anita are vibrant writers of India origin. These fictions portray with force, wisdom and passion the agony which tortured and tormented the human spirit during the pre and post-independence. Their narratives are strikingly significant as their experiences are shared openly, of course, with their own spectacles of caste, creed, religion and nationality. Yet the authors' narratives help the readers to learn about Indian history and enables them to be aware of the injustice done to many in the name of religion.

Keywords: Human spirit, post-independence, celebrity, vibrant, narratives.

Introduction:

According to W. H Hudson, "Literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, what they have experienced of it. What they thought and felt about these aspects of it which have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us."

Literature mirrors the society that is beautiful, ugly and melodious; a cacophonous song of humanity on the earth. It is the treasure of human soul and mind which reflects the real face of

society. It reflects the reality of one's life and endows an identity either in the form of creating a new way of life or interpreting it. The Partition of India in 1947 was a traumatic incident in the Indian History which was considered Dark period. The British left and the country was fragmented into two halves India and Pakistan. The division not only divided our land but also our religious belief, culture, tradition, morality, emotions, feelings, pain, thought process, soil, men, women and even children. All the Indians together hoped and fought for a new dawn, the Independence. Those who fought together started fighting among one another. But finally, when freedom was achieved, it ruined, divided and left the country empty handed with little hope. Thousands of men and women were massacred; a large number of women were raped, children were mutilated and properties were either burnt or looted. Millions of people lost their homes and had to flee to save their lives. Women, who are always treated as symbol of family honor were raped and humiliated in order to punish or take vengeance on the enemies.

Many Indian novelists witnessed the unprecedented tragedy and shared the agonies of partition in myriad tones and different perspectives. All the literature dealing with partition portrays violence and threat to women. Women, the worst sufferers, were mutilated, looted and raped. Men too suffered in terms of loss of life, material loss and displacement but women's loss was irreparable. Women lost their dignity, self-respect, self-esteem which is inseparably alienated to their 'purity' or 'Pavitrata' that cannot be regained.

Anita Rau Badami's novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* is an addition to the burgeoning genre of novels exploring the relation between the political and the personal; how ordinary lives survive extra-ordinary tragedies, and what survival in this context means? The novel weaves the tale of Sharan with the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and continues till the explosion of Air India Flight 182. The reader is not bogged down by history as Badami artistically weaves and connects series of events in a single thread such as partition of India, the Golden Temple incident, Indira Gandhi's assassination, and the subsequent massacre of the Sikhs through the eyes of the three women characters Sharan, Leela and Nimmo. *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* vividly reveals author's warmth and understanding of daily insight, besides the scents and sounds of India and Canada. It shows the turbulent effect of partition on immigrants' lives and how they suffer perpetually with haunted memories of their past-horrors of the massacre and deadly devastation and uncertainty of survival of their dear ones.

The novel is set against the backdrop of Punjab Division and moves between India and Canada. The protagonist Sharanjeet Kaur, called Bibiji, migrates to Canada after her marriage. In the gloomy shadow of the partition in India, her sister Kanwar and niece Nimmo were lost. Kanwar became a victim of partition as she was raped by her neighbors. Though she could not save her pride, she protects her daughter Nimmo by hiding her in a grain bharoli. (A barrel to store grains) Kanwar commits suicide and Nimmo, the eyewitness faces the tragic devastation of

partition throughout her life. Due to partition, she becomes an orphan and haunting memories of her mother's suicide does not allow her to lead a normal life. Nimmo was adopted by a couple and later was married to Satpal. Nimmo lives with her husband and children in Delhi. During the second partition, like her mother, Nimmo tried to save her child by hiding her in an almira but her house was raided and burnt. She could not save her children. Her husband Satpal was humiliated and burnt alive. Even Bibiji loses her husband Pa-ji in the Sikh communal riot.

Ice-Candy-Man's plot, which is set in India shows the bloodiest holocaust division of India and then shifts to Pakistan. *Ice-Candy-Man* is perhaps the first novel in English which is written from the Pakistani standpoint. Her writing intends to stir readers' conscience and make them aware of the real facts of history. Sidhwa dexterously uses powerful narrative techniques for arousing social consciousness among the people. Being a woman, she takes freedom to emphasize and sympathize with women characters that are treated as a member of second sex. She uses first person narration to make it livelier. Bapsi Sidhwa experiments by employing the eight year old Lenny as the narrator to describe the heart throbbing story of partition. Readers come to know about partition through Lenny's eyes and perception. Lenny, a polio-affected eight year girl, is the protagonist of the novel and the mouth piece of Sidhwa. Lenny's Hindu Ayah faces extreme violence and is raped by the Muslim mob headed by Ayah's admirer the Ice-Candy-Man. They rape Ayah and keep her in the brothel of Hira Mandi. Ice-Candy-Man forcibly ties the marriage knot with her and changes her name as Mumtaz. Lenny's Godmother saves Ayah from Hira Mandi and sends Ayah to her family in Amritsar. In an interview, Bapsi says:

"Victory is celebrated on woman's body; vengeance is taken on woman's body. That's very much the way things are, particularly in my part of the world."

It is evident from both the novels taken for study that there was synchronization and coordination among all Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs before partition. They were celebrating their festivals under a common umbrella. In *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Bibiji and Pa-ji live in a house called Taj Mahal, a house "full of Sikhs chattering in Punjabi, sipping milky chai and eating hot jalebis."(134) The couple run a restaurant 'The Delhi Junction' in Canada where Indians and Pakistanis called 'Desi Community' flock under one shed and discuss their mother land, India.

Badami records, "A taut rope is tied them all to "home", whether India or Pakistan. They saw their distant homes as if through a telescope, every small wound or scar or flare back there exaggerated, exciting their imagination and their emotions, bringing tears to their eyes."(65)

Both the novels are set in the background of religious communal violence during India's Independence. They draw the attention of readers by using women protagonists to

explore the experience of women. All the human values were devastated in one day and the communities which lived in harmony became bitter enemies. Both the novels record the tragedy of partition, the communal passion, selfish greed for power and religious belief which maddened and blinded them to kill the people with whom they lived and worked together for years. After 14th August there were numerous stories of savagery sweeping in India. Badami with a note of ferocity and bitterness declares, "August 14th had arrived like a hurricane". Bibi-ji recalls, "Few months later in August, the British had left the Indian subcontinent and Punjab had been divided between two nations-India and Pakistan." (42)

In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Lenny is also affected by violence at Lahore. She says, "The whole world is burning. The air on my face is so hot I think my flesh and clothes will catch fire. I start screaming: hysterically sobbing." (137)

Ice-Candy-Man and *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Were published in the year 1992 and 2007 respectively. The works of Badami and Sidhwa are loaded with sensational descriptions of the tragic incidents of the partition. Interestingly, Anita Rau Badami links love and tragedy over a span of fifty years; it starts with partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and goes on till the explosion of Air India flight 182. She connects a chain of events like partition of India, Indo-Pak war, the demand for Khalistan, Operation Blue Star, the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and Anti-Sikh Riots. Sometimes the descriptions seem too dramatic; while sometimes they are so realistic that one gets confused between truth and fiction. As Mark Twain said, "Truth is stranger than fiction". Bapsi deals with the theme of partition so realistically that she intensely describes the acts of looting, attacking and burning of trains, abduction and rape of women and the parades of naked women.

Bapsi Sidhwa and Anita Rau Badami portray, the men characters with equal significance and did justice to the characters by mentioning their complications and feelings. The characters of Sardarji, Pa-ji or Satpal and *Ice-Candy-Man* and *Masseur* are sketched with great care. Their choice of words and phrases are very tactful to convey their hopelessness in heartbreaking situations. They embrace the compassion of India from villages to city like no one else could do.

Both the authors share their experience as they perceive it by structuring their narratives. They explore a common plot in which suffering and death are the inevitable fate of sexually transgressed women characters. Like Anita Rau Badami, Bapsi Sidhwa does not present women characters as stereotype victims but gives a new direction to them to lead a normal life. The novel begins when partition riots initiate and ends after the conception of Pakistan. It portrays all the age groups of women from young Lenny to the benevolent Lenny's godmother Rodabai. In Sidhwa's world, the readers witness how the so called

physically weak female figures unite in compassion to rescue one another. She focuses on feminine characters that are endowed with the traits of bravery, sacrifice and justice. Women characters perform their duty by resolving the problems of fallen women and thus become real heroes. In *Ice-Candy-Man*, Sidhwa never makes her narrator's physical impairment a source of pity but makes her assertive and courageous; one who takes control of the situation and influences others positively. On the contrary, Anita Rau Badami's protagonist Anwar commits suicide after her rape. Nimmo also tries to kill herself when she loses her entire family in a communal riot.

Bapsi Sidhwa, awardee of National honour Sitara-i-Imtiaz, has a distinct Parsi yet Pakistani ethos. The *Ice-Candy-Man* is a politically influenced novel. Sidhwa feels that injustice is done to Pakistan and its leaders. She tries to develop the self-esteem of Pakistanis through *Ice-Candy-Man*. She confesses the same to David Montenegro during their conversation;

"At least, I think a lot of readers in Pakistan, especially with Ice Candy Man, feel that I've given them a voice, which they did not have before. They've always been portrayed in a very unfavorable light. It's been fashionable to kick Pakistan, and it's been done again and again by various writers living in the West....And I feel, if there's one little thing I could do, it's to make people realize: We are not worthless because we inhabit a poor country that is seen by Western eyes as a primitive, fundamentalist country only."(51)

Sidhwa's views regarding partition is perceptual and interpretation is distinct. The great political personalities of the time, Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose are defamed in the novel. She cleverly uses her innocent child narrator Lenny to her advantage to present Gandhi in an unfavorable manner. She addresses Gandhi *"as a very stiff villain of the piece"* and Lenny says about Gandhi, *"an improbable mixture of a demon and a clown."* and sometimes she skillfully shows childlike observation of Lenny. Lenny questions, *"Can one break a country? And what happens if they break it where our house is?"* She believes that Jinnah has been dehumanized by others. She says:

"And I felt, in Ice Candy Man, I was just readdressing, in a small way, a very grievous wrong that has been done to Jinnah and Pakistanis by many Indian and British writers. They have dehumanized him, made him a symbol of the sort of person who brought about the partition of India....whereas in reality he was the only constitutional man who didn't sway crowds just by rhetoric."(50)

With the help of these statements she tries to uplift the impaired image of Jinnah. The brilliant description of Sikh's attack on Muslim villages in Punjab is also part of her politically influenced plan to evoke sympathy for Muslims. She believes and tries to make others to believe that, *"the Sikhs perpetrated the much greater brutality-they wanted Punjab to be divided."* She believes and tries to make others believe that the Muslims in East Punjab

suffered more because of organized violence by the Sikhs who were manipulated by Gandhi and Nehru. These statements unfurl Sidhwa's loyalty towards her country.

In Anita Rau Badami's novel, communal violence crosses the borders and affects Indians irrespective of their caste, community and social status. Nimmo loses her husband and children and Bibi-ji loses her husband in Amritsar. The truth of deadly effect of partition has been depicted in the following lines,

“Entire Village- Hindu, Muslim and Sikh-had been burned to the ground. Women had been killed by their men to preserve their honour, for it feared that if they remained alive they might be abducted or raped. Trains loaded with dead bodies came and went across the newly established border and ten million people lost their homes, their families, communities and memories.”(51)

Badami also tries to showcase the experiences of Sikh immigrants who are settled in Canada. The trauma and anguish experienced by Sikhs and their partition with native land and relatives. Their separation from their own land and blood relations, consistent resonance of nostalgia, unforgettable pain of partition and craving to meet their relatives. Badami depicts the flaws of Indian politicians and society who did not do anything to stop the catastrophe and blames them for the death of thousands of innocent people. Her main aim for writing the novel is to provide a social understanding. Badami writes,

“Bibiji found it hard to believe that people who had lived as neighbors and friends for so many years could suddenly become enemies just because of a line drawn on a paper map in a government office. (51)

The grief and sorrow of partition of Indian sub-continent that is shared on the pages of novels is not enough to understand the agony. We can still hear the call of innocent people and helpless women. The partition is not the end of pain, it continues. Humanity never witnessed such ruthless, shameless cruelty of man to another man for the sake of religion. The man-made disaster interrogates the incredible history of humanity. It is the duty of the authors to uphold their moral values and compassion to provide human accounts in diverse ways pointing out that everyone is equally at the fault and placing the blame on one another shoulders is irreverent. Every individual should question the subsequent violence on both sides of the border in a very effective manner. The communal riots are contemporaneous and those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat it. It's an appeal to the great leaders of great countries not to provoke communal frenzy to fulfill their selfish desire and bring this kind of situation which makes the next generation feel ashamed of history. There is a clarion call from both authors that Human life is a gift of God. It should not be wasted because of false religious beliefs. All

the nations have equal responsibility of establishing a code of values which would ensure amity and harmony among the countries for betterment of mankind.

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