

Women as Metaphor: A study of Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Night Bird Call?* and Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What The Body Remembers*

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ABSTRACT

*Time and again writers have written to comprehend, analyse, record and reflect the emotions behind the tragic incidents of August 1947. The trauma faced by people caught in violence across the borders has been a common theme in the literature produced in the Indian subcontinent, yet the impact of partition continues to interest the native and the diaspora writers of India and Pakistan. Two Indo Canadian writers, Anita Rau Badami and Shauna Singh Baldwin, have presented a heart wrenching saga of partition in their novels *Can you hear the Night bird Call?* and *What the Body Remembers* respectively. They focus on the Sikh women who experienced partition and suffered tremendous loss. This paper is an attempt to understand how women saw and felt when the world around them suddenly changed in the name of religion and homeland. It aims to unravel how during partition women metaphorically represented land, honour and other things.*

This paper was written keeping in mind two small but highly significant scenes from two novels by Indo- Canadian novelists. These vividly described scenes form an integral part of the novels and helps in developing the central idea of the novels. However, Anita Rau Badami and Shauna Singh Baldwin's vivid and detailed description of these scenes have left a lasting impact on the readers. Though these works are not termed as partition literature, especially Anita Rau Badami's, yet their treatment of partition in these novels makes it worth revisiting.

Anita Rau Badami is a writer settled in Canada, whose writings have created a niche by her consistent effort to tell the story of immigrants settled in Canada. The setting of her works are essentially India or Canada. Shauna Singh Baldwin also belongs to the same category of expatriate Indian writers. Baldwin too narrates stories of her homeland. Her first novel *What the Body Remembers* received critical reviews for its depiction of the trauma endured by a woman's body. Essentially it is a pre independence story of Satya, the bold and beautiful wife of Sardarji, the Canal Engineer of the Lahore Region. Satya's innumerable qualities and expertise in home management does not make her a complete wife as she was unable to bear a child for Sardarji. Sardarji's sudden marriage to the young, beautiful and innocent Roop commences a life of compromise for the two women, where he pits one

against the other. *What the Body Remembers* represents the humiliation a woman endures on account of her body. In case of her inability to procreate, she leads a life of humiliation, often at the mercy of the other members of her family and other cases her inclusion in the family is solely for the purpose of reproduction. In both the instances her significance is limited to the functions of her body.

Through the novel *Can You Hear the Night Bird Call* Badami narrates the story of three women and their trial and tribulations in life. With the ambition of the central character Sharanjit or Bibiji, Badami takes us from a small village in Punjab to Canada's multicultural society. The other two characters become an integral part of Bibiji's life and become a part of the story that is told. Sharanjit's childhood fascination with Canada makes her cleverly entice her sister's suitor and make it into her ticket to Canada. She fulfils all her dreams in Canada but is overcome with guilt when her simple and straight forward sister, Kanwar stops writing back after the partition of India and Pakistan. After years of guilt and anxiety, Bibiji is able to trace her niece by the help of her friend Leela. But the heart wrenching saga told by Nimmo, Bibiji's niece about partition forms the turning point of the novel.

This paper aims to study how during the partition women became metaphors to represent a number of things and emotions. As Badami and Baldwin both describe the trauma and violence that accompanied the partition, they bring out the different experiences of women during the traumatic events.

Through the horrifying journey that Roop and Sardarji travel to cross the border, Baldwin highlights the plight of thousands of people who were displaced. The novel shows how a woman was considered a metaphor for the patriarchal family honour or the "*izzat* of the *quom*". Something that had to be protected from the 'other' at all costs. Her body was seen as the property of her husband which was ultimately his responsibility therefore during partition when communal riots broke out, the property and the woman had to be protected.

They were mostly sent to safe place with all the movable property, like Roop is sent with her children and all their valuables in a car. This metaphorical semblance of women and honour takes an ugly shape during any war like situation. Protecting their honour and property becomes the first duty of the men as Baldwin quotes some men in her novel saying, "I made martyrs of seventeen women and children in my family before their *izzat* could be taken. I made martyrs of fifty."(497)

Interestingly, the honour of women was so important that men preferred to kill them instead of putting them at risk or accepting the dishonoured women. To face dishonour was unacceptable but killing wife, sister, daughter in the name of honour was acceptable. Even

Roop was surprised by her father who killed his daughter in law, she remarks, "Papaji thinks that for good, good women, death should be preferable." (521)

Kusum, Roop's sister-in-law embraces death at the hands of her father in law and does not say 'no' as she represented the honour of the family. But one wonders if Roop's father could escape with his grandsons and maid, why couldn't he take his young daughter in law. Is it because a young woman was seen as an appendage, a liability, difficult to protect during escape, therefore she is sacrificed.

A disgraced woman became a metaphor of shame, someone who was often ignored or discarded and left to her fate but never consoled for her trauma or accepted by the family. This left little choice for the woman, especially during partition most of them accepted death at the hands of their family members. In 1949, Indian Parliament passed a law called the abducted persons (recovery and restoration) bill, which gave the government unlimited power to remove abducted women in India from their new homes, and transport them to Pakistan. Ironically, what was realised that "quite a number of them were not at all eager to return. The biggest reason is of course the sense of anxiety and shame about being marked as "fallen women"-- they weren't at all convinced that they would be accepted by their families."

Metaphorical representation of women as the *izzat* of men, family or *quom* goes back to the time when patriarchal structure came into existence. Since then women were seen as the bearer of blood or the carrier of the future generations. She is considered equivalent to an object, a valued possession who was chased or robbed during partition. Like objects robbed or looted by thieves and dacoits, partition literature describes women abducted by men of both the communities. In this regard Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin in their book state that "So powerful and general was the belief that safeguarding a woman's honour is essential to upholding male and community honour that a whole new order of violence came into play, by men against their own kinswomen; and by women against their own daughters or sisters and their own selves." (1998, 44)

In 1947 when hatred on the basis of religion was the pre-dominant attitude, women became the medium of revenge. In order to avenge the injustice or forced migration that people of both the communities had to face, the men embittered by the loss targeted the women of the other side. As Baldwin describes, sometimes in order to humiliate the other community, Muslim men abducted Hindu women and made them dance naked in mosques or as a man remarked, "they raped my daughter before my eyes". (497) Even Deepti Misri, in her paper entitled, "The Violence Of Memory: Renarrating Partition Violence In Shauna Singh Baldwin's What The Body Remembers states, "It is now a commonplace that in 1947,

as Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh mobs fought one another in the violence of India's Partition, women became, in the way that is typical of war, the primary symbolic and literal targets of communal violence." (2)

Besides, during this tragic situation, women became the metaphor for mutilated and plundered motherland. These two novels describe instances of women whose wombs or breasts were mutilated, they represent the plundering of the motherland, the destruction of the mother and her reproductive capability. In a way it hints at the destruction of the future generations of the country. Besides the violated tortured and mutilated body of women also became a metaphor for the lesson taught by the men of the other community. Purposefully cutting the womb or breast conveyed the message of hatred and warning for the entire *quom*. As Roop perceives, "Men itch their anger upon woman- skin, swallow their pride dissolved in woman's blood."(492)

Anita Rau Badami's description of violence during the partition revolves around the story of Nimmo and her mother. Nimmo's recollection of her childhood was disjointed images of the tragic memories of her mother's death. Living in a village which became the battle ground during the partition, Nimmo faintly remembers her father and brothers going out of the house and never returning. But it is her mother's hanging body that creates in her a fear so great that anxiety becomes her second nature. As described by Badami, Kanwarjit, Nimmo's mother becomes the metaphor of loss and hopelessness that overcame many women during partition. Having lost her husband and son in the communal riots, Kanwarjit is overcome with hopelessness and shame when her house is plundered and she is raped by an angry mob. In her effort to save her child when the mob comes marching she hides Nimmo in a grain box. The mob of angry men ransack the house to kill the men, but when no one is found they leave after raping Nimmo's mother. Her humiliation in her own house engulfs her with shame and hopelessness and she hangs herself leaving the little Nimmo alone and clueless. Hence her mother symbolised the hopelessness that overpowered reason and hope in the victims of violence and hatred.

Yet, analysing these incidents from a second perspective reveals that these women did not just symbolise loss and trauma but they also present women as saviours or protectors. Kanwar faces the angry mob but saves her daughter by hiding her in the grain box. Kusum agrees to get her neck slashed by her father- in law's sword so that he can easily escape with her sons. When Roop and her children are confronted by a group of roguish Muslim soldiers, she orders her servant to take her children and hide in the sugarcane fields .Further she also comes to rescue her maid servant, Jorimon who was being physically abused and molested by

the lecherous men. With unmitigated courage unknown to her own self she shouts and asks them for their names and threatens them of dire consequence till she successfully scares them away. Even Revati bua who was old and dependant, stands as a protector, a saviour of her family when their house in Lahore is attacked by Muslims. She stands guard to protect her family by stopping the mob and agrees to convert to Islam in order to buy time for her family's escape.

The silence of thousands of women who lost their homes, valuables, family, honour and identity metaphorically speaks of the trauma embedded in the subconscious mind of all those who experienced the partition. The genocide left many scars as in Nimmo the image of her mother's feet hanging in the middle of the room becomes a haunting image throughout her life. Even the love and care of her husband and children could not erase "the chalky taste of fear that had clogged her throat". Eventually this childhood trauma becomes the cause of her biggest sorrow. After years of being haunted by her fear of impending disaster, Nimmo tries to protect her daughter and acts like her mother when from the mob. Overcome by fear that had haunted her all her life she goes a step further and ushers the death of her daughter by locking her in a cupboard. Nimmo's action can be understood in the light of Furruk Khan's statement on the trauma of partition, "Individual trauma, on the other hand, is most often suffered in silence, and whenever language is used to convey it to others' or even to self time after time, the pain somehow remains submerged, somehow imbedded within the injured self, and language fails to extricate the experience from the depths of the unconscious where it continues to reverberate, poisoning the daily existence of the survivor and thus paving the onset of victimization to the knowledge and burden of indescribable trauma."(2)

Thus these two writers in their respective works have described the trauma of partition from the women's perspective. In keeping partition as an incident in their story, they have shown how women during the partition represented many things but seldom a living being with feelings and emotions. It is often seen that women become the biggest sufferer in any war or conflict, similarly during the partition of the Indian sub continent also, loss that women endured was emotional, physical, psychological, social and financial. She became the metaphor of loss and mutilated motherland, of uprooted community with its identity lost.

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Biographical note

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Declaration

This is to state that the above paper entitled “**Women as Metaphor: A study of Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Night Bird Call?* and Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What The Body Remembers***” written by Dr.Urvashi Kaushal, Assistant Professor of Sardar Vallabhbhai National Institute of Technology, Surat is an original piece of work and has not been submitted for publication anywhere else.

Therefore kindly consider it for publication in your journal.

Thanking you in anticipation.

Sincerely,

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