

**ART FOR SOCIAL PURPOSE:
A STUDY OF ANITA RAU BADAMI'S CAN YOU HEAR
THE NIGHTBIRD CALL?**

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ABSTRACT

There are different views regarding arts. Two contesting views are 'Art for art's sake' and 'Art for a social cause'. Among arts, literature has a special place and many famous literary figures who stood by the view that literature should serve the society. Anita Rau Badami attempts to sensitize and arouse people for a cause. The best example is her Can You Hear The Nightbird Call?. The plot revolves around innocent people caught in the muddle created by a few selfish fanatics. Sharan marries her sister's suitor and lands in Vancouver. She attempts to trace her sister and family, missing since partition of India. Leela, who moves to Vancouver after marriage, plays a key role in connecting Sharan and her sister's daughter, Nirmaljeet. Sharan takes it upon herself to educate Jasbeer, Nirmaljeet's eldest son. Khalistan movement in India picks momentum; Indian army's Blue star operation at the Golden Temple kills Paji, Sharan's husband; the massacre following Indira Gandhi's assassination turns a personal tragedy where Nirmaljeet loses her daughter, son and husband. Jasbeer turns a rebel and joins the Khalistan movement. Anita Rau Badami presents how certain radical ideologies wreck the life of common people. This paper is an attempt to study her Can You Hear The Nightbird Call? as a call to awaken the society's conscience through arts, especially literature.

Key Words: Anita Rau Badami, Can You Hear The Nightbird Call?, partition, violence, ideologies, conscience.

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As the early nomadic humans turned to agriculture for regular sustenance, their nomadic life turned to settled life. This settled life, mostly agrarian, gave them ample time for themselves. It is at this juncture that arts entered human life. The first forms of arts were basically performing arts like music and painting, and at a much later stage literature entered the arena. Later art and literature turned a part and parcel of life. As civilizations established themselves there formed two distinct schools of thought, the first is 'art for art's sake' and the second, 'art for social purpose'. The supporters of the school of thought that promotes the idea 'art for art's sake' understand art and literature as meant only to create beautiful works to please people or to entertain the artists themselves. The proponents of the school of thought that promotes 'arts for social purpose' understand art and literature as meant to serve people and help them in their struggle for a better life by arousing people's emotions against oppression, injustice and increasing their sensitivity to suffering. When all other art forms like music, painting, create mood, literature arouses thought. Literature is distinguished from all other art forms by its great emphasis on thought content as compared with form. Thus there lies a greater responsibility with literature in this regard.

Philosophy, defined as a set or system of beliefs, through books, debates and discussions, is meant to direct, guide or make people aware of the other options in life; make clear the thought patterns of the past and present, and possible trends of the coming future. In most cases it is done through lengthy, multi volume treaties dealing with themes and concepts attempting to understand God, humans, nature, reality and truth. But there is

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considerable number of instances where the goals of philosophy are achieved through various arts especially through literature. Plato from the ancient times, St. Augustine from the medieval times, Soren Kierkegaard, Albert Camus, Jean Paul Sartre from the modern era are but a few prominent figures who presented or communicated their set of ideas and beliefs through literary pieces, setting before the people what they feel ought to be the ideal. Areas and themes they deal with vary from serious religion and politics to mundane day to day struggles for existence.

Rationalizing presentation of philosophy through literature, Prof. Peter Rickman says, 'in fiction and drama we are introduced to individual figures that illustrate in concrete detail what it is like to be human, it presents us with fictional characters who show how particular persons in specific situations respond'. (Peter Rickman) Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Karl Jaspers, Simone de Beauvoir and Norman Mailer are but a few noted figures who successfully reached their goals and effectively communicated their set of beliefs through literature. Rabindranath Tagore, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, Kamala Das are a few prominent figures among the Indian literary scene of old, who communicated their understanding of life through literature. Anita Desai, Manju Kapur, Jhumpa Lahiri are a set of more recent authors, who followed their instincts and expressed their uninhibited views, especially through literature. And Anita Rau Badami is one among them.

Anita Rau Badami was born and brought up in India. Though from the southern part of the country, she spent many years trailing different parts of northern India along with her father, who was an engineer, working with the railways. She completed her graduation and after marriage followed her husband to Canada. Though she penned a few short stories as a teenager and youth, it was only after her course in creative writing she established herself as a writer. In fact her first novel Tamarind Mem was the term paper she worked on for her course. Establishing herself as an author she continued writing and has four novels to her credit, viz. 'Tamarind Mem', 'The Hero's Walk', 'Can You Hear The Nightbird Call?' and 'Tell It To The Trees'.

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Though all her works are thought provoking and reflect the different shades of the society, the people, their thought patterns, this paper is a study of Can You Hear The Nightbird Call? as a call to awaken the society's conscience.

The plot opens in a remote dusty village named Panjaur, with Gurupreet Kaur struggling to make the ends meet, with a husband lost in thoughts and two daughters, named Kanwar and Sharanjeet Kaur, to take care of. This lost in thoughts husband, Harjot Singh, abandons them in pursuit of his own dreams, leaving them to fend for themselves. With no option left Gurupreet Kaur, for her daughters' sake, is forced to project that her husband turned a revolutionary for the country. Once attained marriageable age, Sharan the younger and more beautiful, draws the attention of all her sister's suitors. Much against her mother's wishes she woos and wins her sister's suitor and Gurupreet is forced to find an alternative for her elder daughter.

After marriage Kanwar goes with her husband, is happy and has children. Sharan on the other hand waits in India to join her husband in Canada, which gets delayed due to war and other technical reasons. Meanwhile she learns Gurbani, English and the English ways to please her husband. At last she joins her loving husband who fulfills all her wishes. With a single mind they help other compatriots settle, run their provisions store and later The Delhi Junction Café, where they cordially receive and entertain customers from different nations. Sharan gets everything that she expected in life except the gift of motherhood. In due course, during partition when millions of people were killed or left homeless on streets, Sharan loses contact of her sister. The guilt of snatching her sister's fate eats into her conscience and she ever remains in search of them, taking up many acts of penance. Any disturbance in the distant motherland evinces interest and discussions at The Delhi Junction Cafe.

A parallel plot that runs is that of Leela Bhat, who started her life as a half and a half, with a brahmin father and German mother. Looked down upon, she does her best to get a foot hold in the house she is despised in. After the death of her mother, she takes charge of her father and thus of her position in the family. With her strong will to survive, she wins

not only the hand of Balachandra Bhat, but also a new, different and complete identity. She settles into the routine of the new household, with Balu in the teaching profession and everything set. A letter from his friend unsettles Balu and triggers in him dreams of distant lands, with a longing to go to the far off lands which finally lands him in Vancouver and his family, Leela, Arjun and Preeti join him later.

The second parallel plot is that of Nimmo, Nirmaljeet Kaur, wife of Satpal Singh, the long lost niece of Sharanjeet Kaur. In a sheer coincidence, Satpal, the taxi driver who drops Leela at the airport with a request to look for his wife's aunt, turns out to be the one Sharanjeet Kaur, Leela's landlady in Vancouver, has been in search of for years. With Leela providing the link both families get in touch. Nimmo and Sharan recall and relate their lives to each other, about the partition woes where millions of people lost their honour, home and hope in life. Nimmo as a child finds shelter with a sikh family in Delhi, grows up, marries Satpal and has three children, Jasbeer, Pappu and Kamal. When the couple are struggling to make the ends meet, Sharan comes to do something for Nimmo and family, and absolve herself of the guilt eating her up from the inside.

Nimmo and Satpal reluctantly give in to her request to take and educate their eldest son, Jasbeer. In Canada, Jasbeer turns out to be a tough child to handle, both at school and at home. He drifts away from both Nimmo and Sharan. Nimmo misses Jasbeer and longs to get him back, but fears trouble her due to India Pakistan war.

Amidst the chaos, the movement for separate Khalistan picks up momentum. Dr. Randhawa, a welcomed guest at Sharan and Paji's house, addresses a small gathering and sows the seeds of revolution in Jasbeer. Much admired Indian premier, Ms. Indira Gandhi, orders emergency, to the dismay of all Indians, at home and abroad. This political fever turns the ever joyful atmosphere at The Delhi Junction to grim silence. After nine years Dr. Randhawa visits Canada and is received by a large crowd, but not welcomed at Sharan and Paji's home. Jasbeer joins the rebel group to fight for Khalistan.

To weed out the militants hiding in the Golden Temple, Indira Gandhi orders Operation Blue Star. Caught in the chaos are Sharan and her husband, Paji, on a pilgrimage

to the Golden Temple; eventually Paji dies in the battle of power equations. Not long after, Indira Gandhi is assassinated by her body guard, a member from the Sikh community. As an act of retaliation thousands of Sikhs are mercilessly massacred. Among the casualties are Satpal, Nimmo's husband; Kamal and Pappu her children. Nimmo is left shattered and is cared for by Kaushalya, her neighbour. Events in India, have their repercussions in Canada and friends become foes. Sharan talks to Jasbeer and prods him to meet his mother. He leaves to India but never reaches the destination.

After a long wait Leela is on the much awaited trip to India, with lots of gifts and hopes. Her husband Balu receives a phone call informing him about the bombing of Kanishka, the Air – India flight carrying Leela Bhat along with many other passengers, none of whom survive. In the light of all the happenings Sharan reflects and regrets for what she did and what she failed to do. Nimmo is left in a state of perpetual shock, never to understand the existing and continuing real life around. Jasbeer after a lot of introspection returns home to his mother.

Anita Rau Badami in an interview confesses to having witnessed a Sikh community member being burnt to death, caught unaware, helplessly alone and with no knowledge of for what and why he is being punished. This she says pricked her conscience and stimulated an urge in her to speak out, and speak out in a manner that it touches at least a few, make them think and in turn make the world a better place to live.

All through the novel she is never judgmental, never biased because of what she witnessed, nor suggestive of this or that as an alternative to uphold the values in the society. She grills several noted events like 'The Komagata Maru', 'the partition of India', 'the operation blue star', 'the assassination of Indira Gandhi' and 'the bombing of Air-India flight, Kanishka'. In all these events the decision makers are one or a very few people, but the resulting consequences, always negative, affected a few hundreds to millions of people, for life. 'The Komagata Maru' is a clear case of power politics and the common man is caught in the muddle. Speaking of the men on board Sohan Singh Josh says:

The Komagata Maru passengers were not political men, nor was the charterer of the ship a political leader. Most of them were ex-military men who had served the British government loyally as mercenaries in the war fought for expansion of the British empire. They had gone in search of employment and betterment of their lot.' (Josh iv)

The people who embarked on the journey putting everything they have at stake besides being left penniless and with shattered dreams, were also branded as political prisoners and outlaws. The character of Harjot Singh, father of Kanwar and Sharanjeet Kaur in the plot, is a depiction of one among many such people. Branded as traitors, considered as out-laws and left to fend for themselves the victims could not come to terms with life.

Filled with bloodshed, partition of India will always remain as the dark part in Indian history and a nightmare in Indian psyche. Speaking of partition of India, Roy says "the impact can be compared to that of great war of Britain or the second World War on Japan and France" (Roy, P.) The brutality and beastly acts of the so called animal rationale moved many an author on both sides of the line separation, and prompted them to lay bare the events around the ghastly event in history. Naresh Garg points out "Be it The Rape by Raj Gill, The Shadow Lines by Amitav Ghosh, The Sunlight on a Broken Column by Attia Hussain, Waiting for the Mahatma by R. K. Narayan, The Ashes and Petals by H. S. Gill, Twice Born Twice Dead by K. S. Duggal, all these works depict the plight of the ordinary people caught in the turmoil of the birth of a new nation". (Garg 28) Can You Hear The Nightbird Call? of Anita Rau Badami falls in line with Chaman Nahal's Azadi, Kushwanth Singh's The Train To Pakistan and Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice Candy Man.

Avoiding being as explicitly violent as the other authors are, Anita Rau Badami attempts to make the readers feel the pain, the suffering and relive the horrors of partition in a sensitive manner. Though she remains detached and gives an objective but comprehensive perspective of the events around partition, she successfully makes it clear

that the victims, the majority who bore the brunt of all these violent and brutal episodes are the common people who never understood why the so far friendly neighbor turns violent. Not leaving the narrative on a pessimistic note, Anita Rau Badami like Kushwant Singh's Juggat Singh who bears the ray of hope in humanity, has characters like Kaushalya who stand for the needy and prove themselves good samaritans.

Anita Rau Badami chronicles 'Operation Blue Star', 'Indira Gandhi's Assassination' and 'the bombing of Air-India Flight Kanishka' in similar fashion. Doing so she attempts to awaken society's conscience and prompt people to think and act, not giving in to enticing mob mentality. Doing so she silently accepts the responsibility of forming the society through literature and thus endorse the principle of 'art for social purpose' in a novel fashion.

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