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Diaspora, Displacement and Women: Representation of Women's Diasporic Experience in Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* and Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*

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Abstract:

'Diaspora', the term itself suggests a physical displacement at the surface level. With immigration an individual – man or woman – faces not just physical, but displacement at the psychological level. The women, however, undergo displacement at multiple levels. The factor that leads to the displacement of women is immigration led by marriage. This is emphasized especially in case of South Asian women. The protagonists of the two fictions taken up for study here reflect the experience of women who always have some void within them as a result of getting married to diaspora men. Memory of the homeland and the distance from their near and dear ones made these women feel dislocated and misplaced.

Keywords: Diaspora, memory, dislocation, marriage.

The entire gamut of diasporic literature deals with a few common issues in keeping with the experiences of the immigrant folk. The reasons behind the immigration of different people are different and the experience of a diaspora depends upon the political situation of the host country. It also needs to be mentioned that some of the experiences of the diaspora are very closely the same, irrespective of place, time, gender and so on. In Clifford's words, "These, then, are the main features of diasporas: a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship" (Clifford 305).

When people leave their native country to inhabit a foreign country, which becomes their host country, usually they happen to long for the times spent in the former. There might be rare cases of immigrant people who have found home like 'home' in their host countries. But, mostly, those who have always felt that there is a 'home' away from the home they inhabit in a foreign land suffer from the sense of dislocation. This sense of dislocation is seen when people look for familiar faces in public places, speaking familiar languages or search the telephone directory for names that might belong to someone from home (here, the native country). The sense of dislocation of the diaspora is also evident when people belonging to the same country, community or religion gather and celebrate the festivals celebrated at home. From these gestures of the diaspora it can be understood that they seek to keep the part of their 'home' alive even in a

foreign land. They try not to feel dislocated in space and time as a result of immigration. But memory is that catalyst which connects as well as disconnects. It is the memory of their experiences back 'home' that connects them to their pasts/'home', and again, the memories of immigration and experiences in the host country alienate them. They get alienated from their roots while trying to adapt to the culture of the host country. In this relation Meenakshi Thapan comments, "The immigrant's experience of the present is coloured with a persistent desire for return, a sense of deep nostalgia for their homeland" (Thapan 29). Unfortunately, due to their experiences at 'home' and with the baggage of their native culture they cannot wholly adopt the culture of the host country. In this regard, the story of King Trishanku, as illustrated in the novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* by Anita Rau Badami is a befitting example. This story, narrated by the character Leela, narrates how King Trishanku belongs neither to the land nor that in air. He occupies an in-between space. Similar is the condition of the diaspora. This condition has been elaborately stated as:

...this idea of otherness as an inner compulsion changes our conception of 'cultural identity'. In this perspective cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark. It is not-once-and-for-all. It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return. Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either. It is *something* – not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories- and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects. The past continues to speak to us as a simple, factual 'past', since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always – already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*. (Mongia 113)

When we speak about dislocation, it can be noted that dislocation is both physical and psychological. The physicality of dislocation is the immigration of an individual from one place to another or one country to another. But dislocation at the psychological level multiplies. The sense of being displaced disturbs both the genders. Such is due to the clash of cultures. The culture in which one has been born and brought up always remains dominant. While trying to adapt to the culture of the host country the culture that is dominant in the individual crops up. The pull of the native is strong because the experiences are engraved in the memory. As discussed in the above quote, the past or history of an individual floats in the lake of memory. People become nostalgic and at times long to belong. However, there are exceptions to this as well. No doubt, one cannot erase one's memory or history while relishing the newly formed ones. But so far as the idea of 'home' is concerned, it differs from person to person. From the literal meaning of the word "home" we understand a place that ensures comfort, shelter, security and so on. As the sense of comfort, security and being sheltered is related to one's feelings, it

may vary with individuals. This idea has been put up in the essay “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do With It?” as, “The relationship between the loss of community and the loss of self is crucial. To the extent that identity is collapsed with home and community and based on homogeneity and comfort, on skin, blood, and heart, the giving up of home will necessarily mean the giving up of self and vice versa” (Martin 307). Despite the common grounds in which both men and women feel dislocated, the experiences or the feeling of dislocation in respect to women are peculiar at times. In this paper therefore, an attempt would be made to focus on the grounds on which the experiences of dislocation of women differ from that of their male counterparts.

In *A Golden Age* the protagonist, Rehana undergoes several dislocations. At the time of her marriage with Iqbal Haque Pakistan was undivided, yet there was India in between East Pakistan and West Pakistan. Her sisters lived in West Pakistan (now Pakistan) and she settled in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after her marriage. However, she didn’t want to belong to her maternal place or the home she grew up. She found ‘home’ in her husband’s place, in the home she built herself with her two children. On the sudden demise of her husband she found her world has collapsed. She experiences her first sense of dislocation at the loss of Iqbal – a loss nothing could compensate. But she gathered herself up and recreated a world or ‘home’ with her children – Sohail and Maya. Again, her sense of loss of ‘home’ gnawed her when her brother-in-law took away her children after her husband’s death, despite Rehana’s reluctance, saying she wouldn’t be able to take care of her own children.

The split that Rehana felt, one that left a scar within for life, the one she had to bury in her heart, was when for the sake of getting her children back she had to compromise her self respect, her dignity as a woman to that oily smelling man in the bank. In order to get the loan from the bank to build her house, to be able to make an income by renting it, she submitted to the amorous advances of that man. Just because Rehana failed to provide a guarantor the man took advantage of her. But she agreed to his condition due to the reason that the thought of losing her children forever was more agonising than the compromise she made. With the children being taken away from her, she felt more dislocated. Such is because her ‘home’ was never outside her children. This sense of being dislocated from the ‘home’ she so tenderly nourished terrified her. Rehana’s anxiety after her children were taken away from her can be felt when she addressed to her dead husband, at the beginning of the narrative itself, saying, “Dear husband,

My children are no longer mine” (Anam 3).

So far as the political situation during that time is concerned the government under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was trying to give East Pakistan the status of a separate nation named Bangladesh. On the other, the state machinery of undivided Pakistan was using its power in not letting the Partition of Pakistan happen. Although Rehana was not much affected by the upheavals within the nation, yet she was concerned about the fate of East Pakistan because her children got actively involved in the revolution for the independence. Her sole interest lay on her children and them being together. But she was misunderstood by Maya. The former was

alienated by her daughter when the latter was rebuked for getting actively involved in the revolution. Maya said to her mother, "Why did you bothered to bring us back? You have no feeling for this place" (Anam 102). These words from her daughter made Rehana an alien, a refugee, a dislocated, displaced being in the place which she has considered her 'home' since marriage. Feeling lost she affirmed saying back, "This is my home. Your father's home" (Anam 102). The words heard from her own daughter shook her sense of belonging to the place she thought she belonged for years. That moment made her an immigrant.

Remarkably, Rehana could not go back to find her lost connection with her childhood home and her sisters in Pakistan (West Pakistan then). Whenever she thought of writing something, words deceived her because she could not feel any sort of connection to her siblings anymore. The sense of alienation from her blood relations show when the narrator conveys that:

She imagined the letter she would write. Dear sisters, she would say. Our countries are at war; yours and mine. We are on different sides now. I am making pickles for the war effort. You see how much I belong here and not to you. (Anam 119)

From the above it becomes clear that Rehana's sense of belongingness laid in East Pakistan or soon to be Bangladesh. But when she heard from Maya that she had no feelings for the place she thought she belonged, her self got displaced. The gesture of sewing kathas for helping the people involved in the war was to assure her daughter that she too belonged to Bangladesh.

Memory locates as well as dislocates. Time and again Rehana remembered moments spent with her husband, how she was about to lose her children, how much she has struggled to get them back, the extent of her sacrifice – which none other than she knew. These are the memories that located and also dislocated her in space and time. She asked the man who was working to build the new house to name it "Shona". On being asked the reason behind the name, she said that it was as precious as gold because it was this house that would bring back her children.

The fear of losing her children returned again to Rehana with the tumultuous situation that East Pakistan was going through. Moreover, the active involvement of Maya and Sohail magnified her insecurities as a mother. Her fears found physical realisation when people started coming out to the streets and the Pakistan army bombed here and there to stop the revolutionaries demanding the declaration of East Pakistan as an independent nation called Bangladesh. Nevertheless, both of her children went to join the revolution and things became terrifying for Rehana when one day Sohail went out and did not come back for days. All she knew about him was that he had crossed the border and went to Agartala. One day he came back and she got to know that he had become a guerilla. She felt that she will have to sacrifice her son to the revolution. This was a nightmare for her. But she could not stop him because she feared that her allegiance to the place she considered 'home' would be questioned again.

So far as the idea of 'home' is concerned Rehana differs from Bibiji in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*. The latter always longs for her 'home' in India after she married Sardarji and went to Canada. Although she wanted to marry Sardarji, he being a resident of Canada when she was still a child, yet after she has lost all contacts with her family she felt dislocated. Bibi-ji's sense of dislocation was accentuated by her inability to bear a child of her own. She longed for motherhood. She thought that it might be because of her elder sister's curse that she could not become a mother. This void in her had grown over the years she had spent in Canada. With this also grew her longing for her family, with which she had no contacts after the Partition of India. She didn't even know if anyone from her family survives after that.

Bibi-ji's sense of dislocation seemed to aggravate as she grew old. However, this began in her childhood. For being a girl child in a poor family she was always made to feel herself as a burden. So, even though her mother asked her not to show herself up when Sardarji came to see her elder sister for marriage, Bibi-ji did the reverse. She came in front of Sardarji and as she was better in looks than her sister, he immediately liked her. Although she successfully married Sardarji her sense of dislocation began when she landed in an alien land and she couldn't meet any one from her family year after year.

The blow to Bibi-ji came in the form of Partition of India. The Partition wiped out all the traces of her family. The village to which her family belonged became the border of India and Pakistan. Before the Partition she had words with her sister through letters now and then. But after the riots began she heard nothing from her sister. The last letter received by Sharan alias Bibi-ji from Kanwar "was dated February II, 1947" – a time when the Partition bell was ringing (Badami 42). In this letter Kanwar wrote about her daughter Nimmo. The former writes of how her daughter asks about Sharan. This letter also carries the news that Kanwar is expecting once again. The growing tension of Kanwar about their fate can be sensed in her words in the letter:

Ever since it was announced that there will be a division of land between the Hindus and the Mussulmans, there has been unrest everywhere. There are rumours that Punjab will be broken into two pieces – one piece of our heartland to stay in India and the other to go to Pakistan. This is the name that Muhammad Jinnah has chosen for his new country. I do not know which piece we will end up in. Where will my new child be born, I wonder? (Badami 44)

Not having heard from Kanwar for a long time Bibi-ji enquired about her and her family. She got the news that Kanwar's family members died in the clashes between the Sikhs and the Muslims. The only hope that she could hold on to was Nimmo – who is said to have joined the procession that moved from their village Dauri Kalan to some other place. It is an incident of 1948 and Nimmo was just five years old. Bibi-ji's toilsome efforts at searching Nimmo ended in vain.

In 1967 Bibi-ji happened to meet Leela – another immigrant from India to Canada like her. Coincidentally, the taxi driver who drove Leela to the airport in Delhi to fly to Canada was Satpal – Nimmo's husband. Satpal, having known that Nimmo's aunt Sharan immigrated to Canada before the Partition of India, gave his address and his wife's name to the passengers who head towards Canada. He has done the same when he came to know that Leela was going to Canada. Although Leela accepted his request to tell Sharan about Nimmo if she meets the lady in Canada out of humility, yet it is she herself who became the link between Bibi-ji and Nimmo. When Leela had come to know the real name of Bibi-ji she gave her the address. Leela rummaged the purse and handed over the piece of paper that bears the address given by Satpal for Bibi-ji. Finding a new ray of hope of finding the only survivor of her sister's family, Bibi-ji wrote to Nimmo immediately after.

Bibi-ji had nothing but the memory of her childhood to cling on to when she thought about 'home' because her family got erased in the tumult of partition. For Bibi-ji again Partition 1947 was the historical event that uprooted her roots and she could not locate, other than her memory, where her 'home' lay. Her memory too deceives her in tracing her native place because she immigrated to Canada much before the Partition 1947. Therefore, with the hope of finding trace of her long lost family, Bibi-ji wrote to Nimmo. Although Sardarji has settled and bought a bungalow for his wife, yet Bibi-ji was always disturbed by the fact that she has lost her 'home' and what remains are memories. She feels as though she is that branch which has been cut off from the tree. To recreate her 'home' in Canada she gives shelter to people from India, who didn't have a shelter there. They were mostly were strangers and have been living at her place for years. She takes care of both fooding and lodging of those people. Still, the sense of displacement for having lost all connections with 'home' gnaws her from within.

Both in time and place Bibi-ji finds herself dislocated. In time because it's a long time since her marriage that she has visited her native land. Moreover, it's also quite a long time that she heard anything from 'home'. Even though many years have passed she did not stop to revisit the memories of her childhood, how she got married to Sardarji and how she came to Canada. To come to Canada was child Sharan (Bibi-ji)'s fantasy. When she got married to Sardarji, she felt that her dream had come true. Hardly did she know that her fantasy would leave her with the feeling of being a displaced, dislocated being.

Both the protagonists – Rehana and Bibi-ji – of the novels selected for discussion in this paper differ in their ideas of 'home'. Rehana's sense of belonging rests with the place of immigration. But there are moments when she too feels dislocated even in the place she considered her 'home'. On the other hand, Bibi-ji looks back to her disconnected past and makes a continuous search to locate her 'home' – that has been dislocated by the Partition 1947. Rehana, too, finds herself amidst the tumult of the divide of East and West Pakistan, with East Pakistan seeking the status of an independent nation. In the process Rehana feels that the 'home' – which consisted of her two children and their safety after her husband's death – was in a state

of jeopardy. She felt dislocated more so because the happenings in East Pakistan, threatened her sense of 'home' with both of her children getting engrossed in the revolution.

In addition, her son becoming a guerilla was beyond Rehana's imagination. For a moment she regretted bringing her children back from Pakistan (West), from their uncle's home. Although she tried to hold on to her sense of belonging to the place that was soon to be known as Bangladesh, yet the consequences of the warfare displaced her sense of 'home'. Every moment she spent with the fear that she might lose her son to the revolution, or her daughter would leave home, without even informing Rehana, to join the revolutionaries across the border. And it was she herself who knew that 'home' meant nothing without her children. Therefore, her sense of displacement was more within her than outside. It is due to this that even though she was initially reluctant to accompany Maya across border and leave her home, she went with her daughter to live with the refugees – whom the latter and other volunteers were taking care of.

Bibi-ji's sense of dislocation is both within and out. Her fantasy of getting married to a Canada based Indian and settling in Canada got fulfilled. But soon her happiness shattered with her inability to bear a child. She thought it was the curse of her mother and elder sister that has turned her infertile. She wanted to ask for forgiveness, but the geographical distance between her and her 'home' did not allow her to do so. Somehow the narrator seems to symbolise the land that has turned barren quite like Bibi-ji's inability to conceive. The land on which she was born and grew up has been divided by barbed wires and have become the border of India and Pakistan. Nothing grows on that land for miles and there is scarcely any trace of the villages that thrived there before the partition of 1947.

The other women character in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* is Leela, as mentioned above. She shifts to Canada with her two children because her husband works there. It is Leela's narrative that poignantly depicts the state of the diaspora. She gives the example of the King Trishanku to speak of the situation of the diaspora. It is her experience since her childhood that prompts her to compare and in fact understand the experience of the diaspora better. She has been labeled as "half-breed" (Baldwin 82) by her grandmother because she was born of an Indian father and German mother. This treatment towards her by her paternal family made her hate her mother. Such is due to the reason that she has attained the looks of her mother. From this it becomes clear that her sense of displacement is since childhood. She wanted to get out of that situation, to occupy a place which was not in-between. But immigration to Canada after marriage aggravated that feeling in her. When she remembers her childhood, how her mother died almost in her hands, the narrator informs the readers that, "She also understood that to survive she would have to use whatever means she had to get away from this house to a place that she could own entirely. She would have to create, like the sage Vishwamitra had done for Trishanku, a heaven for herself" (Badami 87-88). But she realized that she could not create that place even though she married and immigrated to Canada. With this feeling in mind she remembers her grandmother saying that:

“Nothing worse than to be a dangling person, a foot here and a foot there and a great gap in between. Imagine how painful it is to stay stretched like that forever.” Like King Trishanku, a floating, rootless, accursed creature, up-in-the-air. (Badami 392)

It is evident from these lines that although Leela sought to find a ‘home’ or may be create one of her own, the memories of her experiences before marriage comes back again and again to displace her from her sense of ‘home’. Towards the end of the narrative it is found that when she was about to leave Vancouver for Bangalore – where she had found her ‘home’ after getting married to Balu, she seemed disturbed. Even though she wanted to dislike Vancouver and think about her ‘home’ in Bangalore something bothered her. She, somehow, consoled herself that Bangalore was her ‘home’ and not Vancouver, and that she would get rid of the sense of displacement. But it is remarkable that her thought when she boarded the plane to India expresses her sense of displacement. She thought:

“I am going home. A doubt crept into her mind unbidden. Where was home exactly? Back in Vancouver or ahead of her in India? She had forgotten, lost her bearings. (Badami 391)

This “doubt” that bothered her, leading her to question herself about locating home tell the readers about her sense of displacement. She is unable to locate the ‘home’ that she has been longing for for years. Thus, her sense of displacement doesn't find any reconciliation even at the point when she is returning to India, and that sense has multiplied in her.

In *A Golden Age* Rehana seems to console herself by thinking that the war did not claim her son's life like his friends. Although she has found herself displaced at different stages of her life after her husband's death and then because of the Bangladesh war for Independence, yet she was relieved to find that the ‘home’ she had built with her two children was safe. She says:

This war that has taken so many sons has spared mine. This age that has burned so many daughters has not burned mine.

I have not let it. (Anam 315)

With this feeling she says, “...and today I will clutch my flag” (Anam 315). When she says, “clutch” and not hold it seems that with the newly formed country she has discovered ‘home’, and a relief from the sense of displacement she suffered from. She always had at the back of her mind what she had gone through. But her greatest consolation was that both her children were with her at the end of the war. Therefore, she has accepted Bangladesh as her ‘home’ and not Pakistan – her father's place. Likhurt's words describe the mental state of Rehana appropriately; “...a physical trauma is something that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes. We have, as it were, nowhere to put, and so it falls out of our conscious memory, yet is still present in the mind like an intruder or a ghost” (Luckhurst 499). This finds an echo when

at the close of the narrative she says, “I know what I have done” (Anam 315). These words throw light on the journey, the sacrifice, the struggle she has gone through to reconcile her sense of displacement after the death of her husband. She did not give up even though she almost lost her children to her brother-in-law, Faiz and his wife, not even when she had to compromise her dignity to the old man at the bank and also when she almost lost her children to the Bangladesh War of Independence. Nonetheless, she was traumatised by these incidents that aggravated her sense of loss and displacement. She fought so that her sense of ‘home’ which rested on her two children did not get shattered, although memories of her past surface now and then. This sense would not leave her because her ‘home’ was with her husband. She found herself displaced with the latter’s demise. And having lost Iqbal at the merciless hands of death she found ‘home’ with her two children. But her sense of displacement can be noted when in the narrative she shares everything with her husband whenever she visits his grave and also sometimes in the form of letters. That displacement is within her, all the time, is evident when she says addressing her absent husband, “I have given up the only thing you left me” (Anam 8), when she was bound to allow her children to be taken away by Faiz when they were kids.

The analysis of the women characters – Nimmo, Bibi-ji, Leela and Rehana – show that the sense of displacement that they go through is as a result of immigration or the loss of their ‘home(s)’. Although, exceptionally, Rehana finds home in her husband’s place, the sense of being displaced and dislocated bothers her time and again because of her experiences. However, the sense of displacement that the women diaspora go through finds expression in the quote, “Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful – struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies” (Clifford 314). Understanding the life experiences of the diasporic women characters (as portrayed in the novels) focused above throw light on the fact that these women constantly negotiate with their ‘home’ and their experiences in their host countries that displace them.

Notes:

1. The word home is put in single quotes to indicate the individual idea of home of the characters, the ideal place which they have painted in their minds and have put in their memories; mostly about their past spent in their native countries.

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