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In/External Politics of Belonging: Trishanku Position of Punjabi - Canadians in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

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Abstract:

Movement is an intrinsic nature of humans. Since time immemorial humans have started moving from one place to another in search of betterment of life. Living in a protected/better place alone will not solve the hazards faced by the humans and at times it may leave things complicated as place/space is a complex one which defines/shapes human lives. Since it develops the psychology of the humans, space becomes an innate part of human. Moreover, its importance can be well understood from concepts such as 'place identity' 'Politics of belonging' and 'belonging'; these concepts propose the significance of place in the formation of identity. Hence wherever they travel, humans carry their homelands and are inclined to live in their imagined homelands. As a consequence it leaves them in an oscillating position in between their homeland and the settled land. In spite of their stay for many years/ generations in the settled land, they consider their home land as the place they belong. This turmoil of place identity leaves them to be more sensitive towards the happenings in their home land than the natives. The hypothesis of the paper is to project the impact of place identity and internal/external sense of belonging in the lives of Punjabi- Canadians and its effect upon India and Canada. To do so Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* is taken as a yardstick for study.

Keywords: Diaspora, Politics of belonging, Trishanku, Identity.

Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Night bird call?*, narrates the life saga of three women characters Sharanjeet Kaur, Leela and Nimmo, two in Canada and one in India respectively. Through the life chronicles of three women characters the novel projects many historical phases of Punjab and psychological facets of immigrant community in Canada. Anita Rau Badami is an Indo-Canadian writer whose works project the life style and culture of Indians, as natives in India and as immigrants in Canada. This novel is based on the major historical incidents in India and Canada since 1910's. As the novel is dense with many aspects

and versatility with which a thesis can be written, the paper tries to limit with a few findings. It tries to cull out answers/reports to below mentioned issues,

1. Immigrants' internal/external sense of belonging: their helping nature towards conflicts in the home country
2. Trishanku position of immigrants.
3. Literary text as historical record: historical account of Punjabi-Canadians

Belonging & Politics of Belonging:

Yuval's article "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging" emphasis on the concepts 'belonging' and 'politics of belonging'. The paper uses this article to read parallel with the novel *Can You Hear the Night bird call?* to cull out the types of belonging followed by the Punjabi Canadians. Many believe that emotional attachment with something/one gives source for the art of living. Psychologists state that attachment leads to the urge of living and development. This psychological concept of attachment is derived from the ideas 'belonging' and 'politics of belonging'. The word 'belong' is about attachment and identity that vary from person to person. It could not be constant as it changes in the course of time. Nira Yuval states that, "belonging can be an act of self-identification or identification of others..." (199). She uses three analytical levels to understand belonging 'social locations', 'people's identifications and emotional attachments' and 'ethical and political value system'. The important factor which is responsible for these three facets is space. Here the word space indicates the geographical location which is essential for identity in the context of migration. The migrants, though emigrants from their home country to a settled land carry their home land in mind. They tend to live in their imagined homeland and consequently they go to the extent of creating their own (imaginary) communities in the settled land by strictly following their homeland culture, tradition, food, language etc. This develops their sense of belonging to the homeland. Though living as immigrants for many years, most of them tend to consider it as a foreign land by paying importance to their home country.

Many settled nations complain about the immigrant communities binding with the home country. In spite of living for many years in a settled land, they desire to follow their home culture and tradition for many generations. Regarding this Yuval Davis states that fear of separation from a group/ relation leads them to 'belong' to something. As the immigrants live outside their home country, chance for belonging to the 'space' is impossible; hence they

move to the re-constructed communities (198). This is how the immigrants tend to create their own homeland in the settled country. The novel *Can You Hear the Night bird call?*, projects the creation of mini India in Vancouver. The Delhi Junction, a restaurant serves the purpose of uniting all the Indians at times even Pakistanis with the feeling of being at 'home'. The regular visitors occupy specific places in the junction and if it is filled with new people, they will wait for their places instead of occupying the empty chairs which indicate their attachment with space. Such sense of belonging is constructed and maintained especially by the migrants through repetition of acts and performances. "Specific repetitive practices, relating to specific social and cultural spaces, which link individual and collective behaviour, are crucial for the construction and reproduction of identity... and construction of attachment" (Yuval:203). Throughout the novel especially when it talks about life in Vancouver, the Indians follow the typical cultural life style of theirs in India. By forgetting all the diversity and prejudices one has in India about the cultural richness of their states join together as Indians to celebrate India's Independence Day. Such kind of togetherness creates a kind of attachment even among the next generation.

The term 'politics of belonging' is defined as "the dirty work of boundary maintenance" (15) by John Crowley. It is completely based on the idea of citizenship. Though some people especially immigrants get citizenship in a country, the problem lies as to which country they feel as belonging. It is "...all about potentially meeting other people deciding whether they stand inside or outside the imaginary boundary line of the nation and/or other communities of belonging, whether they are 'us' or 'them'" (Yuval: 204). Hence in the politics of belonging that is belonging towards a border /geographical location, many immigrants feel belonging to the homeland and some may develop belonging towards the settled land. Based on their sentiments towards the geographical location, politics of belonging can be seen in two categories: 1. internal politics of belonging, 2. external politics of belonging. Brubaker, a researcher explains this as, "The internal politics of belonging apply to populations that are durably situated within the territorial ambit of a state but are not—or not fully—members of that state. The external politics of belonging pertain to the membership status of populations that are durably situated outside the territorial ambit and jurisdiction of a state but claim – or are claimed—to belong, in some sense, to that state or to 'its' nation" (66).

The novel presents most of the characters belong to the type of external politics of belonging. Living away from the home country makes them to be emotionally attached with it more than the natives. It leads them to react more emotionally if the home country gets some

threat from a foreign country. In the novel historical incidents like war between India and China, later with Pakistan regarding the separation of Bangladesh, are narrated. During such occasions Indians in Canada showed their enmity toward the Chinese by rejecting to buy products from them. The war between India and Pakistan disturbed the livelihood of The Delhi Junction. “In 1965, when war broke out between India and Pakistan, the battle came to The Delhi Junction as well. The seating maps altered, and Hafeez and Alibhai moved defensively over to a separate table across the room from the Indian group. The linoleum floor between them turned into the Line of Control- an unseen barrier of barbed wire stretching across it, hot lights blazing warning as soldiers stood guard with guns cocked. Anger, hurt and loss simmered on both sides” (66-67).

Some immigrants being emotionally addicted to the home country go to the extent of sacrificing themselves or others to safeguard the reputation of their country / community. The novel portrays a belief of Punjabis’ that they were subjugated by the Indian government. They think that the Indian government misuse their natural resources for the well fare of the other states of the nation. Dr. Randhawa, a reputed Sikh scholar in the novel, gives voice to the shared feelings of the Punjabis. “... by the Congress Brahmans, who gave the Mussulmans their Pakistan and the Hindus their India but left the Sikhs to die like flies in between; then by Nehru, with the rose in his jacket and his cunning words, who tore our hearts in half by making our Punjab a bilingual state. And now we have been cheated again by the rose-wearing Brahman’s daughter Indira Gandhi, who takes the wheat that we grow on our lands and distributes it to all of Hindustan, who diverts the water from our rivers to neighbouring states and leaves us with empty buckets, who has ordered us to share our capital city, Chandigarh, with the Hindu state of Haryana. We fight wars for them, give up our young men for the safety of their Hindu lives...We have been *betrayed*,...”(252-53). He motivates Sikh community people all around the world with a single aim of a separate nation for the Sikhs named Khalistan. The Punjabi immigrants due to their sense of belonging to Punjab support such activists by funding them. Later when Pa-ji and Bibi-ji visit Amritsar the native Punjabis blamed the immigrants for creating trouble in the country. “It is people like you sitting in foreign countries, far away from everything, nice and safe, who *create* trouble. *You* are the ones who give money to these terrorists, and we are the ones who suffer!” (326).

The main characters Bibi-ji and Pa-ji follow a practice of inviting the Punjabi migrants from India. They afford them with food and shelter till they find a job. This way their house becomes a hub for all the Punjabi immigrants to stay. Pa-ji states, “People helped me when I

came here, and this is my way of paying back. We are strangers in this land and have no body but our own community to turn to” (47). In spite of their living for a longer period, they both try to cling to their own community. Later the death of Pa-ji at Amritsar induces the anger of Bibi-ji against non-Punjabi Indians. In Vancouver she stopped her communication with other community people. She considered the other Indian immigrants as a reason for Pa-ji’s death. She knew from Lallo that travelling in Air India was not safe that time as they sensed something. When Leela bids farewell to Bibi-ji, after 17 years of her stay in Canada for a short trip to India, by stating that she was leaving by Air India Bibi-Ji did not warn her about the danger of travelling in it. She thought it was not her business. It proves her binding with her community over her friendship with Leela.

Internal politics of belonging is experienced by some of the minor characters especially by the second generation as they are born and brought up there.

Trishanku:

Most of the immigrants leave their home country voluntarily or forcefully. However, in the course of time, they get the pull factor either from the homeland or from the settled land or some immigrants get pull factors from both the countries who experience the condition of in between. Their condition can be called as the condition of Trisanku. The novel narrates the story of King Trishanku, who got the boon of reaching heaven with mortal body after death from Vishwamitra. Thus, after death he was reaching heaven with his mortal body and Gods asked Viswamitra to stop this as it is against nature. Hence Viswamitra stopped him in the void between earth and heaven by creating another heaven around him. Thus, he hangs between heaven and earth that is, not here not there, an unpleasant state for humans. King Trishanku’s condition is compared with the position of immigrants between the home land and the settled land. Even before landing in a new land they sense their oscillating position and their destiny to continue in it. It is clear from Pa-ji encourages Bibi-ji to study English in India before coming to Canada. He states, “‘It is important to know where you are coming from and where you are going,’ her husband wrote. ‘For this you need both languages, the language of our soul and that of the goras. This way you will be a two-edged sword’” (33). Thus, she was prepared to assimilate with the new culture. Contradictorily she brought her home country within herself unknowingly. They named their house Taj Mahal, their restaurant as The Delhi Junction and allowed the house to be filled with the Punjabis. Once Bibi-ji says, “‘But this *is* Punjab... Inside my home it will always be Punjab” (135). At crucial times she looked at the Indian communities

other than Punjabis as rival and withdraws herself from communication with them. From this one may believe that she lives as a Punjabi than as an immigrant in Canada. But at the same time when a white man insulted her without responding to her, she felt hurt by thinking that she too belongs to that place. It creates the confusion of belonging.

Similarly, Leela encourages her cultural practices to the children in Canada. When her daughter faces confusion of following Indian cultural practices in Canada, Leela answers, “Remember, it’s an in-between space. Neither here nor there. It is dangerous” (110). She lives with the guilt about her children’s ignorance of home culture. Hence, she desperately wanted her children to remember their home country and thought it as her duty to keep it alive in their mind. However even after 17 years of stay in Vancouver, she doubts about her identity and 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” (391). The other first-generation immigrants too share the same kind of feel of in betweenness. Accordingly, the immigrants always suffer with the basic sense of belonging. “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” (292).

New Historicism:

Thanks to the concept New Historicism, as it converted the ideology of literature from fictive to record of societal happenings. Through this approach one can understand that literary texts use historical situation, not merely as a decorative backdrop to the work, but as an integral part of it. Hence the concept New Historicism insists that in a literary work one cannot divide the texts in the foreground and history in the background. The novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird call?*, projects four major historical incidents that changed the lives of Punjabis in India as well as in Canada.

1. Komagata Maru:

The novel begins in British India and it presents the Punjabis migration to other nations. Information about the voyage undergone by the Punjabis and their families’ wealthy position is narrated through Sharanjeet Kaur (Bibi-Ji). Since her childhood, she had the desire of visiting Canada as she always remembered it with richness and comfort. The novel uses the historical incident of Komagata Maru, a steamship that carried 376 British Indians especially Sikh passengers from Hong Kong to Canada in 1914. It is claimed that the Canadian

government as it wanted immigrants from Europe, especially Christians and to stop people from the Asian countries tightened its immigration policy in 1908. The immigration policy stated that the immigrants must “‘come from the country of their birth, or citizenship, by a continuous journey’ and using tickets ‘purchased before leaving the country of their birth or citizenship’” (Politics Global News), which was difficult for the Asians to pay huge amount for migration and in many countries no chance of continuous journey. Assuming themselves as the citizens of British, since their country was ruled by the British, the Indians travelled to Canada. Only 20 passengers were allowed to Canada as they happened to be the Canadian citizens and the rest were forced to return India later arrested by the British. As anti-Asian sentiment was strong then, local newspapers claimed that incident as ‘Hindu Invasion’. This major historical event is used as a backdrop of the novel. Sharanjeet Kaur’s father Harjot Singh travelled in Komagata Maru, Japanese steamship that carried passengers from British India to Canada in 1914. When the ship reached Vancouver it was stopped by the Canadian government and the passengers were sent back. So he saw Vancouver from the distance and returned India which haunt him and resulted in his inactiveness. “In his mind he was continents away, in a green and blue city called Vancouver, which he had once seen from the deck of a ship—a place that had turned him away from its shores as if he were a pariah dog” (10). Her father’s disappointment in life and their poverty condition made Sharanjeet Kaur to be ambitious to land in Canada, the country which rejected her father.

2. Partition:

Though partition and the bloodshed are not dealt in detail, it revolves around the life of one of the major characters Nimmo. Partial memory of turmoil of partition and becoming an orphan in a day leaves Nimmo to be scared always. Change in people who lived as family and friends suddenly becoming killers confused her. “Entire villages – Hindu, Muslim and Sikh – had been burned to the ground. Women had been killed by their men to preserve their honour, for it was 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). She was adopted by a Sikh family and later married Satpal, lived happily with her three children. Yet the memory of partition haunted her leaving her to live with constant fear of losing her family. “Her fear was monstrous, silent thing that often woke her, sweating and shaking, from troubled sleep. It made

her suspicious of everyone, even neighbours she had now known for many years, the woman who sold her mangoes in summer and cauliflowers in winter, the milkman, the owner of the bidi shop, the electrician, the policeman—every single one of them was a threat to her security, her peace of mind” (158-159).

3. Operation Blue Star:

Indian military operation ordered by Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, to remove the militants, Bhindranwale and his followers, hiding inside the Sikh shrine, the Akal Takht, with weapons. This attack is named as Operation Blue Star that took place between 1 and 8 June 1984. Thousands of pilgrims were gathered at Amritsar to celebrate the martyrdom anniversary of Guru Arjan on 3rd of June. During that time the attack killed not only the militant but thousands of common people. This shattered the sentiments and emotions of Sikh community which was the reason for the assassin of Indira Gandhi. In the novel Bibi-ji and Pa-ji visit Amritsar and they find the restlessness in the area. Bibi-ji observed men with guns inside the temple who were called as extremists by one of the pilgrims. It is understood from the story that some militants were staying inside the temple with gun and the army people were waiting for them. Pa-ji states, “We don’t know what is happening. There are extremists here too, it seems, inside their own sacred temple, defiling with guns and bombs. It is better not to judge anybody yet” (331). Later when the firing takes place pa-ji is one of the victims in the attack of operation Blue Star. From then Bibi-ji treats other community people from India as her enemy. Sikhs considered the attack as betrayal of the Hindus and they wanted to revenge.

4. Assassination of Indira Gandhi and its Aftermath:

Indira Gandhi was killed by two of her bodyguards, who were Sikhs on 31st Oct 1984. It was an impact of Operation Blue Star which shattered many Sikh people’s belief on her. In the novel the news of Indira Gandhi’s murder created tension among the Sikh community people in India. In the novel the news of assassination alarmed the Sikhs as they will be the target for the rioters, who want to take revenge upon the Sikh. Nimmo, who always fear about life, struggles to safeguard her family. Her husband goes on business work out of Delhi and her son in his work place and daughter at home. As she senses some trouble she hides her daughter in a steel cupboard at home. As feared some intruders entered her home most of them were known people. They burnt her daughter alive in the cupboard and her son and husband were burnt by different mobs. In a single day, once again she lost her family. People hunt the

Sikhs as they were easily identifiable and many were killed. The horror of mass killing and the mere observation of such events by common people and Police is narrated in the story.

5. Bombing of Air India Flight:

Air India flight 185, was operating from Vancouver to Mumbai with connecting flights on June 23, 1985. It was destroyed by a bomb at Atlantic Ocean with 329 passengers. It is believed to be revenge by the Sikhs for Operation Blue Star and anti-Sikh riots after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The plot of sending the suitcase with bomb is narrated in the story. A Sikh man argues with the check-in clerk to take his baggage into the flight. His request was denied as his ticket in the connecting flight was not conformed. As he was insisting her approval and the long queue made the clerk to accept the baggage. It was criticised by Leela, who was to leave by the flight, as “ That man wanted his bags booked all the way to India without having a seat, and the woman allowed it” (389).

The brilliant mixture of history and fiction inspires one to address this novel as a historical novel. It is a platform through narration for the readers to know history of Punjabi Canadians, their struggle in India and their emotional reaction towards it. Moreover, it pictures the immigrants emotional oscillation and in between position. As mentioned in the beginning, this novel is not fictive to enjoy the writer’s creativity and imagination; it is a history of a community which the writer has projected in a justifiable manner. Reading the novel clarifies that imposing the ideologies about the Sikh community or the historical events were not the intension of the writer. Anita Rau Badami blends the views of people from different communities and leaves the final judgement to the readers in a diplomatic way. Travelling in the novel is a wonderful experience for the readers to have time travel since 1910 and to empathise with the immigrant community.

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