

**Caught in the Cacophony of Colliding Cultures:
Vignettes of Leela in Anita Rau Badami's
*Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?***

Kavipriya. S

M.Phil. Research Scholar

Avinashilingam Institute of Home Science and Higher Education for Women Coimbatore,
Tamil Nadu, India

kavipriya9395@gmail.com

Ph No: 9659209358

Mrs. A. Jayasree, M.A., M.Phil.

Assistant Professor (S.S), Department of English

Avinashilingam Institute of Home Science and Higher Education for Women
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

jayasree_eng@avinuty.ac.in

=====
Abstract

Anita Rau Badami is one of the most noticeable writers in South Asian Diasporic Literature. Her novels primarily deal with the diasporic themes of cultural identity, immigration, cultural collision, in-between space, tug-war between tradition and modernity and search for identity. In her third novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird's Call?* she aims to elaborate the state of immigrant's life in an alien land through the character Leela. Leela's hyphenated identity battles to establish their individualities in a new land to handle their bond with new culture and struggle to build a new space for them. Leela as a half-and-half gets neglected by her own family members due to her mixed identity. Badami has widened her novel with the concept of in-betweenness through diaspora. She highlights the term in-betweenness to explicit the idea of hybridity and cultural identity. The collision of two different cultures and then process of cultural adjustments are highlighted through distinctive incidents. The paper elucidates the condition of in-between space and the constant skirmishes to bear a hyphenated identity.

Keywords: Badami, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, in-betweenness, hybridity, diaspora, culture and hyphenated identity.

The concept of in-betweenness is at the heart of all diasporic narratives. Delving into the great impact on the lives of expatriates, these narratives build the tension as the characters encounter various cultural confrontations and negotiate between their ties with the homeland and the alien land. The in-between space brings the spotlight on a vast array of problems such as nostalgia, a sense of no-belonging, alienation, racism, struggle for survival and discrimination. These issues finally leave the scars and become acidic experiences. The lives of immigrants are exposed to a plethora of challenges

across various dimensions. Due to cross-cultural confrontation, the immigrants find difficulties in understanding an adopted culture.

The term hybridity, in-betweenness and third space are the fundamentals in the study of diasporic writers. The in-between space carrying the baggage of cultural conflict later gives the pedestal to the concept of hybridity and a sense of hybrid space. Robert J. C. Young defines hybridity as, “a key term in that whenever it emerges it suggests the impossibility of essentialism” (27). Within this in-between space, the immigrants feel as if they are caught in an inescapable essentialism. Young further says: “there is no single, or correct, concept of hybridity: it changes as it repeats, but it also repeats as it changes” (27). Most of the writers have presented their mosaic of cultural lives of the motherland and the adopted land. The writers such as Bharathi Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Meena Alexander, Kiran Desai, Shauna Singh Baldwin, V.S. Naipaul, M.G. Vassanji, Shani Muthoo, Meera Syal and Sunetra Gupta have experienced cross-cultural phenomenon.

Anita Rau Badami is one of the eminent women writers in diasporic literature. She blends the past nostalgia about India with immigrants’ adopted country highlighting their struggles to assimilate. Her main concern is to unravel the different dimensions of immigrant life choosing to hit the core of the two-fold existence. Badami's characters are caught up between two cultures and try to cope with both. She is one of the handful of women writers who epitomises the importance of two cultures. She has written four novels, *Tamarind Mem* (1996), *The Hero’s Walk* (2000), *Can You Hear the Nightbird call?* (2006) and *Tell It to the Trees* (2011). Badami has focused on the themes such as rootlessness, displacement, estranged relationships, adaptation, assimilation, cultural confrontation and struggle for identity.

Badami in her second novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* has presented the struggle to cope with two disparate cultures in a distinctive manner. Peppering the narrative with both incredible insight and brilliant benevolence, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* displays the diversity of cultures which affects the lives of ordinary people. Leela Shastri is a victim of the challenges of mixed roots. Her mother Rosa Schweers is a German and her father, Hari Shastri is from India. She is the target of her grandmother’s contempt for being half-and-half. Her grandmother calls her half-and-half for being a child of Indian father and German mother. Her cousins call her as a snob and a difficult woman.

Leela is unhappy in her own home. She thinks constantly about her mixed identity and tries to break her half-and-half identity. She wishes to disappear from her ill-fated life. When her grandmother compares her life with a King Trishanku, she feels broken and a sense of rootlessness. Her cousin says, “our Leela is up-in-the-air like that upside-down king” (78). Akka replies with her sour tongue, “Because she is also half here and half there, that’s why ... Like the Anglo-Indians of Cox Town” (78). Leela feels degraded and hurt by her family’s disdainful words. After her mother Rosa’s death, Leela understands that the reason behind her grandmother’s animosity is her in-between state. Leela’s half-and-half position bothers her and also unsettles her mind.

Leela is at ease with Venki, the cook, who takes care of her as a child. When her grandmother scolds her, Venki consoles Leela in kind words. Akka whispers, “Half-breed . . . Worse than an untouchable. At least a toilet cleaner has caste. But this girl, where does she belong? Tell me, somebody, *where?*” (82). Leela remembers her mother's words which is a mixture of languages that she understood partially, “Never forget you are mine. Even though you have their brown skin, you see the world with my grey eyes. They are wicked, filthy creatures, pigs, dirtyevilpigs” (82). Every one of her family members look at her as “the half-and-half child of mismatched parents” (82). She faces an uphill battle to establish her self within her own family.

In India, people expect everything pure rather than mixture of identities. In western culture, diversity of this kind especially in mixed marriages is common and acceptable by the people. The consoling words of her cousin Narayana slightly distract from her sorrow. Narayana tells: “I was half-and-half, Trishanku . . .” (83). Venki retorts:

So. what is wrong with being like Trishanku? Was he not a lucky fellow to have a foot two worlds? Did he not have a heaven of his own around him? Hanh? Tell me? My chickpea, listen, it can be an advantage to live neither here nor there, like a frog, comfortable in water *and* on land, the thing is to understand how to make use of this ability. (83-84)

Leela wishes to escape from her so-called state ‘half-and-half’. When she is in her second year of university, she is invited to her friend’s wedding. She meets a young man named Balachandra Bhat, lovingly known as Balu by his friends and family. He likes Leela and wishes to marry her. He has a doctorate in chemical engineering from the famous Indian Institute of Science. He wishes to settle in Canada with his family. Leela thinks hopefully that her marriage to Balu will redeem her from her half-and-half status. She loves Balu’s ancestors because they are purebred Hindu Brahmins, not like Leela’s mixed identity. She does not like to leave India and its tradition. She listens to her father-in-law words: “What a blessing it is to die in your own bed, under your own roof, with your family surrounding you, full of the knowledge that you have lived as thoroughly as you wanted to” (101). Badami shows the trauma of Leela which is caused by cultural collision of two different cultures. Through the character Leela, Badami reveals that immigration is not a delectable journey. Leela longs to return to her native soil. After she has arrived in Vancouver, Leela admires the beauty and aroma of Vancouver. She declares:

She would not allow herself to be beguiled. She was feeling of the oddest mix of emotions, agitation and anger, for no particular reason. Disappointment, yes, that’s what it was. She was *disappointed* that Vancouver was not something she could readily and immediately hate . . . It was different – a wonderful, clean smell of tree resins and new rain. Leela had to admit it, she *liked* the smell. (108)

Through Leela's sordid struggles, Badami picturises the assimilatory issues such as cultural identity, insecurity, marginalization and hybridity.

The life of Leela is not happy even though she leads an opulent life in Vancouver. She suffers with the feeling of isolation and misery of the foreign country. Many questions arise in her head which reveal her state of in-betweenness: “How long would she remain foreign? Would she eventually become a woman of meaning here, a person who was a somebody, or would she remain without context, tied to a past that meant nothing to anyone except herself? A past, that would, if they lived here long enough, become irrelevant to her children?” (129). Leela thinks her state of in-betweenness never pass on to her children. she feels shocked and insecure whenever she hears the term half-and-half.

Badami shows that Leela as a migrant will always hold the indigenous connections, culture and customs close. She thinks that being in her native place will give her a sense of belonging and an identity. Throughout the novel, Leela feels as an outsider due to her hybrid identity. But she takes great efforts to preserve her native culture in a new land. When her children are grown up, she understands the truth of life. She comprehends what life is when she knows about her son Arjun’s gori girlfriend, Fern. She says:

Leela had just found out herself, and after a night of tossing one-third–grandchildren, she gave up, defeated by fractions, and shrugged mentally. It had been difficult for her—even painful, she remembered, so painful that she had put away, in some dusty corner of her mind, her memories of her large, sad mother. But it would not be difficult in this world, where change and movement and hybridity were commonplace, for any children that Arjun and Fern chose to have. Not so difficult, anyway. (307)

Leela slowly adapts to the surrounding and culture of host country. Her memories give her the strength to make sense of her hybrid space and she cautiously tries to pave her future from the experience she has learnt.

Leela acclimatizes the foreign culture but her love towards native land has not changed. She expresses her desire to go to her native land, “And I want to go to India next year . . . It has been too long” (312). She leaves Vancouver for India. Enveloped in a torrent of thoughts as she boards the plane, she thinks: “. . . *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 has forgotten, lost her bearings” (391). She tries to maintain her native culture and also, she has tried very rigid to hate Vancouver. Unfortunately, she dies in the Air India Flight.

The life of Leela is caught in the conglomerate of questions confined between two different cultures and community. Though she adapts and adjusts to the new life in Canada., she is always in the quest to carve her own original identity amidst all the cultural chaos. Badami moulds her characters to be strong and courageous to face all their struggles. Similarly, Leela tries to live within her space. However, her death on a flight from Toronto to India evidences her position of half-and-half throughout her life. Her birth as half-and-half and death as half-and-half reveals unchangeable identity in hybrid’s life.

Badami portrays the immigrants' sense of in-betweenness and loneliness throughout her novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Badami reflects the sheer feeling of relocation and disaffection that does not let her experience any contentment in life. She displays an immigrant's lifetime pursuit for an identity through her character Leela. Even though Leela is caught in the cacophony of cultures, she understands the reality and modern world. Leela cannot change herself completely because she wants to maintain her native culture and also, she cannot dislike Vancouver. Her life is like here and there because her in-betweenness shows half-ness of life. Badami renders a splendid insight into a bitter reality of immigrants' lives between two worlds. They have a borderline between the culture and the domain of their family and future, which unlocks an array of chance and hopes. She shapes her characters by bringing their spirits to explore and undergo struggle to find the self in this dynamic world. Badami highlights that the state of in-between is not a problem especially in a world that is growing increasingly smaller by virtue of technology and the virtual space. In an ever-ever-changing world, what remains truly constant is change. Assimilation into the challenging spaces created by the sheer diasporic communities and acceptance of the third space as one that enriches and enhances one's persona will help the immigrant lead a peaceful and happy life. In a truly global world with the cacophony of colliding cultures, one has to learn to both adapt and adopt, give in and take away to become a truly global citizen.

Works Cited

Badami, Anita Rau. *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2007.
Young, Robert J C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London: Routledge, 1995.
