
The Fifty-Fifty Man: Understanding Diaspora through Indo-Canadian Literature

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Abstract

Indo-Canadian Diasporic literatures deal with the displacement of identities and the cultural assimilation that occurs over generation and with re-discovering the 'hyphenated-identities' that forms a major part of a diaspora. The constant conflict between 'homeland' and the 'host-land' creates a feeling of displacement that becomes a central theme for diasporic literatures. Indo-Canadian diasporic people bond over their shared nostalgia of the homeland – they experience a sort of parallel existence with one foot in the homeland and the other in the host-land. Through the two prominent novels of Indo-Canadian diaspora – Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear The Nightbird Call?* And Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* we understand the diasporic identity and what it entails. We will study how the characters in both the novels are all effected by the socio-political and economic conditions of India during the 1975 Emergency and how it alters each character. Badami's novel moves between the Sikhs living in India and Sikhs living in Canada and the plight of them, while Mistry deals with Hindu - Muslim conflicts. This paper focuses on how reading these Canadian literatures during a worldwide Covid-19 pandemic changes one's understanding of diasporic literature, cultures and diasporic identities. In a covid-19 pandemic situation when many Indians living in Canada are horrified about the conditions in their homeland, their helplessness for not being able to visit, relying on virtual world/online modes of communication to keep themselves up to date on the conditions in their homeland. Reading Canadian literatures with historical contexts of crises, mass deaths, economic and sociological downfall, political crisis etc., at a time when we ourselves are undergoing or rather surviving through a worldwide pandemic with countless deaths, economic downfall etc., shapes or alters the approach towards diasporic literatures giving us a better understanding of Canadian literatures.

Keywords: *diaspora, indo-canadian literature, can you hear the nightbird call, a fine balance, rohinton mistry, anita rau badami, indo-canadian diaspora during covid-19, reading Canadian literature*

Literature Review

Canada became the land of promises for Indians post-Independence, which creates an upsurge in immigration to Canada, particularly from Punjab and nearby areas. Immigration to Canada became a dream, a goal – as though moving to Canada itself will open up a world full of possibilities and opportunities for people who saw almost little to no scope of betterment in their homeland where the economy was crumbling, overpopulation, political corruption, violence etc., took control over people's lives. A huge number of Indians migrated to Canada over the years and settled there, creating communities, nurturing their culture far away from home. They embraced their new 'home' in their own way – with a little bit of the 'home' they left behind, and a little bit of the new 'home' where they are starting a new life, creating a diaspora of identity. Canadian diaspora is made up of a variety of cultures, religions, identities that the diasporic Canadians have brought along. The immigrants in Canada act as a diasporic community and networks with their shared identities and form a diverse world network. Immigrants, because of their multi-cultural and multi-lingual capabilities that forms the diverse Canadian culture in both national as well as international sphere, create this shared identity. Indo-Canadian diasporic literatures deal with the displacement of identities and the cultural assimilation that occurs over the generations and with the re-discovery of the 'hyphenated-identities' that forms a major part of a diaspora. The constant conflict between the 'homeland' and the 'host-land' creates a feeling of displacement that becomes one of the central themes of diasporic literatures. Indo-Canadian diasporic people bond over their shared nostalgia of the homeland – they experience a sort of parallel existence with one foot in the homeland and the other in the host-land. A mosaic of culture is created within the paradigm of a diaspora, a hybrid cultural identity is produced that primarily gives a sense of in-betweenness and a third space is created that is neither belongs to the homeland nor the host-land.

The Indo-Canadian diasporic authors focus on this concept of hybridity of cultural identity and in-betweenness in their literary creations. The diasporic literatures use this idea of in-betweenness to bring into light a world of complex problems faced by immigrants and people of the diasporic identity like alienation, nostalgia, cultural displacement, racism, discrimination, a sense of not belonging, struggle for survival etc. The lives of the immigrants are riddled with a plethora of problems and challenges caused by cross-cultural assimilation. Anita Rau Badami in her novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* focuses on the complexities of having hybrid identity and the struggles of the characters to assimilate in an alien land and deal with their nostalgia and emotional attachment towards their homeland, India. Badami pierces into how the characters grapple to come to terms with the two halves of their identities, the two disparate cultures to which they belong.

It is crucial to understand that Badami uses a narrative that is so intricately weaved and well-planted historically that it brings the real traumas, struggles and plight of the characters alive. Through the characters of Leela, Bibi-ji and Nimmo, Badami shows how cultural hybridity works, how the internal politics of the homeland is enough to destroy and break apart a community of people, who came together because of their shared identity and connection to this very homeland. This very thing that brought them together now tore them apart, throwing them against each other, creating a state of violence, death and destruction that is primarily rooted in the politics and social turmoil in a country thousands of miles away, a country they no longer live in, yet share a deep-rooted emotional connection to, that is impossible to discard or sever.



The horrors of the Emergency rule of Indira Gandhi and its rippling effect in the lives of Indians living in both in India and Canada proved that geo-political borders get reduced to mere illusions when it comes to human emotions. Exploring the personal and political relations, Badami concocts a narrative that turns ordinary lives into heart-breaking tragedies. Through the characters Leela, Sharan and Nimmo who all face ultimate tragedies just because they were at the wrong place at the wrong time. The Emergency rule and the Golden Temple Massacre starts a domino effect, causing thousands of deaths, riots all over India, Indira Gandhi's assassination that again caused mass massacre of the Sikhs that the readers witness through the characters. What is noteworthy, is the repercussions of these events on the Indo-Canadian diaspora – like the way the Indian community that hung out at the Delhi Junction, owned by Pa-ji and Bibi-ji suddenly was divided into Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus – Indians and Pakistanis; a sudden rift between them all, their shared identity as Indians living in a foreign land no longer was enough to hold them together. Despite of the spacio-temporal distance, the situation was detrimental to the socio-political situation of the diasporic people living in Vancouver which ultimately resulted in the disaster of Air India flight 182 that killed 329 souls.

The identity of being an Indian or the Indian-ness is something that none of the characters can outrun. Even though Bibi-ji and Pa-ji are living in Canada, they still visit India, maintaining their connection to their roots. However, it is this connection that brings about the tragic outcome as Bibi-ji loses her husband while visiting their holy place, the Golden Temple. Even though they are no longer residents of India, they still fall prey to and become the collateral damage to India's internal political turmoil when Indira Gandhi's army attacked the Golden Temple in search of extremists, killing hundreds of Sikhs, including Pa-ji. After her husband's death, Bibi-ji is seen shouting "Khalistan forever" (Badami 2006), with a placard and with that act, she is finally able to have some sleep after many sleepless nights. Similarly, Leela has always felt displaced with her own identity, her mixed racial identity is defined as 'trishanku' by her very family members, the half and half identity - *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?"* (Badami 2006). Even after immigrating to Canada, she could never come to terms with her own identity, neither could she embrace her new life in Canada, she always assumed that they would move back to India. However, when she finally realises and embraces her identity and Canada as a 'home', she faces her fateful death in the Air India flight accident. Even in death she dies as a 'trishanku', neither here, nor there, in the middle of nowhere, between continents. Leela too becomes a collateral damage to the internal politics of India, a faraway land.

Badami through her flawless narrative shows how the diasporic people struggle to find a home. How they are constantly living in two worlds, one of the home-land and another of the host-land. They are truly displaced, in their very essence of identity. Their parallel existence and in betweenness is further complicated by clash of identity between later generations of immigrants who only carry a hybrid identity in its name, devoid of any personal connection to it, for they do not share the same nostalgic emotions that their previous generations have for their homeland, to the later generations the host-land becomes the home-land. The very concept of 'home' becomes a far-fetched dream, a sort of unattainable reality of their existence.

Rohinton Mistry is one of the most acclaimed authors of the Indo-Canadian diaspora. Rohinton Mistry in his novel *A Fine Balance*, focuses on the struggles of the common man, the underprivileged, the middleclass and the lower middle class and their everyday struggles



to survive during the Emergency of 1975-77 under the Prime Ministership of Indira Gandhi. Mistry is one of the few contemporary writers, who have written extensively about India, his home-land, from his place of migration, that is, his host-land, Canada. Through his literary works he has brought into focus the socio-political conditions in India, the regional and subaltern identities and the struggles of it, gender discriminations and plurality of various cultures within India.

Mistry portrays a myriad of characters from various sections of the society and how each of their lives is moulded by the socio-political and economic conditions of the time. What is noteworthy is how efficiently Mistry uses each of the characters to draw the real picture of the conditions of his homeland. Though Mistry did not live in India, he was still able to articulate the horrors of the Emergency and spread awareness about it among not just Indo-Canadian diasporic people but also the entire world. Through the four protagonists – Dina Dalal, Ishvar, Om Prakash and Maneck Kohlah, Mistry shows the various aspects of human life, the tragedies that human life is bound to experience, the struggle to survive and a dream of a better tomorrow, the everyday strife between family members, despair and personal loss in form of deaths, injustice and discrimination between sexes – all of this coming together to concoct a perfectly imperfect ‘balance’ in a world that is full of chaos.

Mistry uses the characters’ life in the city to show the despair, anguish, struggles and emotional turmoil faced by people who left their native villages in search of better job opportunities in the city. They feel uprooted and displaced, their longing for their village is mixed with their confusion about the life in a new city, where its nothing like they imagined it would be. Maneck is the embodiment of these emotions, he wanted nothing more than to stay in his village and is almost resentful for being sent to the city, completely uprooted from his home, his place of comfort and peace. The first discussion about the impending state of Emergency begins when *Ishvar asks, “Dinabai, what is this Emergency we hear about?” “Government problems – games played by people in power. It doesn’t affect ordinary people like us.”* (Mistry 1995) What is ironical is that the Emergency only disrupted the lives of the ordinary people, it is as though it cast a shadow over the lives of the people, who were doomed to suffer and meet tragic ends. The Emergency was a dark time in the history of India with government beautification projects that rendered people living in slums homeless, people were forced to undergo sterilization as a part of population control programmes, labour camps were set up where living conditions were worse. Ishvar and Om were forced to live in such camps where they were later on forcefully sterilized and later on develops an infection for which he had to be amputated thus making him lose his ability to earn his livelihood as a tailor. Even the conditions of women and the discrimination against them was showed through Dina, whose life became an endless battle for freedom and independence after her husband’s death.

Mistry portrays his homeland, India where he longer lives in from a land faraway – his host-land. In essence he too lives in two parallel worlds, with one foot in his homeland and another in his host-land. This hybridity and diaspora of identity is expressed through his creations. It is as though he creates a ‘fine balance’ between the two worlds that make up his identity. He projects his Indian-ness and his concerns for his faraway homeland through his literary works while in reality he is not physically present there, rather physically he lives in Canada, his host-land. His articulate language and narratives that are so grounded in reality, his characters so tragically well written that represent that common subaltern people of India; makes his novels such a success in the trajectory of Indo-Canadian diasporic literatures.



Reading this kind of literature that portrays various emergency situations that marred the human life with tragedies and endless deaths, during the Covid 19 pandemic has changed the way we perceive life in general. As a student my very own understanding and approach towards Canadian diaspora has drastically changed since the world underwent the horrors of the Covid 19 outbreak in 2020. Being in a pandemic situation where the world witnessed darkness, death toll rises, a rise of the virtual world over real world, economic depressions, travel restrictions our very perspective about life altered, in essence our very lives changed. Witnessing the horrors and deaths associated with it gives us a new insight into the plight of the diasporic people, immigrants living far away from their homes, unable to visit their homeland because of the pandemic, hearing news of death of loved ones back home. The feelings of despair and helplessness is perhaps very similar to the ones witnessed by the characters in the two novels that we discussed.

Reading Indo-Canadian diasporic literature while undergoing a worldwide pandemic outbreak not only alters one's views but also alters one's understanding of the world and the emotional turmoil faced by the people within the diaspora. Through Badami's novel we have a deeper understanding about the emotional turmoil that comes with having hybrid identity and diasporic characterization. While through Mistry we understand how as a diasporic author he focuses his narratives on the socio-political issues of his homeland. Even the idea of space and time becomes complicated for a diasporic person, especially in a time when the idea of public and personal spaces is getting altered as the world goes more towards virtuality. With this special rearrangement gives us an insight as to how complicated space can be for a diasporic person. Students at present had never witnessed such numbers of deaths, nor had they witnessed such economic downfall, they had only heard stories of Emergency and its horrors, however with a pandemic outbreak and horrors associated with it and deaths everywhere, their entire notion has changed. Now, they are able to somewhat relate or at least understand better the plight of the diasporic people and have an altered worldview.

Bibliography

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