Chapter 12

Between the Personal and the Political:

Multiple Sites of Patriarchal Violence

in Anita Rau Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

Indian-Canadian novelist Anita Rau Badami has penned several critically acclaimed novels dealing with the complexities of Indian family life as well as the cultural gap that emerges when Indians move to the west. A nostalgic mother-daughter story told by two women from the Moorthy family, Badami’s *Tamarind Mem* is a novel about the power of memory and storytelling. The Washington post reviews the novel as being “splendidly evocative.... as much a book about the universal habit of storytelling as it is about the misunderstandings that arise between a mother and daughter.” Lisa Singh calls her reading experience of *Tamarind Mem* as being “bittersweet….with often stunning, poetic prose, [Badami] gives us an intimate character study of two women” (Star Tribune). Her second novel *The Hero’s Walk* focusses on a family’s sense of loss and disappointment over the choices made against the conventions of a crumbling caste and class system. In her review of the novel, Linda L. Richards calls Badami an “accomplished novelist and a confident storyteller…. [who] brings us India with a Rushdie-like swagger.” Badami’s third novel entitled *Can You Hear the Nightbird call* deals with the politics of belonging. Critics have commended Badami for taking on a “bitter subject and turning it into a thoughtful, highly readable and even slightly hopeful narrative” (Drainie). According to critic Ingrid Ruthig,
the novel is driven by the kind of “hard-to-resolve issues that reflect all conflicts, past or present.”

In *Can You Hear the NightBird Call?*, Badami narrates the saga of three women whose lives are linked together through their experience of violence which is the legacy of tumultuous historical events that visibly altered the fate of large numbers of people. In other words, the novel spans sixty years in the history of the Sikh community in Punjab and Canada. Events like the Partition of India in 1947, the assassination of Indira Gandhi followed by anti-Sikh riots in 1984, the radical Sikh separatist movement for Khalistan, and the bombing of the Air India Flight in 1985 that took the lives of twenty-two Indian nationals and two hundred and eighty Canadian citizens, form the backdrop of this novel, highlighting the devastation of innocent lives that fall victims to violence which they have done nothing to provoke. The author, however, does not let history eclipse the characters in her story because she skillfully adds nuances which highlight the pain and sorrow that engulf their personal lives. Analysis of the novel thus brings to light the violence which is an inescapable part of the personal and social lives of its characters, but which is exacerbated by tumultuous political events.

The title *Can You Hear the NightBird Call?* is quite significant because it alludes to the undertones of violence in the novel. A troubled Nimmo, one of the female characters of the novel, recalls the ghost-story of a four-winged nightbird whose song made people go mad and ultimately die. In his work *The Ground of the Image*, Jean-Luce Nancy states that “violence always makes an image of itself …[and] this image is of the order of the monster” which “warns of a divine threat” (20-22). Here the image of the four-
winged bird also suggests something unnatural and abnormal. An encounter with something monstrous can be construed as a violent experience. In the novel, Badami uses this image of the singing nightbird as the point of concentration of various metaphors of violence. The singing nightbird is the harbinger of death in the ghost-story; it heralds violence into the lives of people. Similarly, the image of the monstrous bird, knit tightly around the stories that unfold in the novel, serves as a forewarning to the reader about the violence that is going to erupt in the lives of the characters. A close reading of the novel reveals the many faces of violence that the song of the nightbird comes to represent in Badami’s narrative, such as economic, political, patriarchal, racist, etc.

The novel begins with an account of the past of Sharanjeet Kaur, an Indian immigrant to Canada. Born into an impoverished family, she manages to change her economic condition by using her beauty and feminine wiles in order to ensnare a rich groom who has been actually promised to her plain-looking elder sister, Kanwar. Her dreams for a better life are primarily fuelled by her father who was himself thwarted in his search for wealth after his ship Komagata Maru, carrying several passengers like him on the lookout for good jobs, was forced to retreat from the shores of Canada (Baldwin 15). But the experience does not cure Harjot Singh of the fever of going abroad to work; it, in fact, consumes his every waking hour and forces him to abandon his family and disappear without any trace. Sharanjeet Kaur’s mother Gurpreet Kaur, on the other hand, becomes a bitter shell of a woman burdened with the responsibility of being the sole bread-winner of her family and of ensuring that both her daughters are married into good families. An analysis of the
circumstances leading to Sharanjeet’s immigration to Canada brings to light the adverse effects of the socio-economic conditions on the fragile bonds of relationships. Harjot Singh is a character who, owing to his failure to improve his economic status, introjects violence; his failed ambitions make him lose his sense of purpose in life. It is his family, however, which has to pay the price for his indulgence in self-destructive violence as his disappearance leaves the three women of the household in dire straits. The silent plight of Kanwar, who repeatedly bears the brunt of rejection from men of marriageable age, is an instance of destructive patriarchal aesthetics because of which a woman is measured solely on the basis of her looks, her “femininity” and her social status. Eligible bachelors find Kanwar wanting in all these aspects and she is, ultimately, forced to marry a widower and stay in India only to be brutally murdered during the communal riots that take place during the Partition of India.

Sharanjeet, on the other hand, migrates to Canada where she establishes a niche for herself and fulfills the ambitions that her father had harboured years ago. She becomes a successful woman and is able to afford the luxuries of life. But even as she settles into her life in Canada, she is never able to quell her nostalgia for her native land. The memories of her past make her a victim to the crisis of belonging and most of the decisions that she takes in her life are a direct consequence of her refusal to fully accept that her life has indeed changed. Sharanjeet, throughout her life, never manages to snap ties with her homeland. She convinces her husband to open a restaurant named The Delhi Junction where the Indian immigrants can gather and ask each other for advice and keep up with the news of all that is taking place in India. The
couple’s home which they interestingly call the Taj Mahal is a haven for new immigrants who can stay there until they find a proper accommodation.

Sharanjeet also spends a considerable amount of time and resources searching for her elder sister because all communication between them has broken down after the Partition. Despite leading a successful and prosperous life in Vancouver, Sharanjeet feels discontented and her happiness is marred mostly by guilt over stealing her sister’s fate. Her childlessness - which she believes to be a punishment for stealing the good fortune intended for her sister – also increases her frustration and dissatisfaction with her life. It is her need to exorcise her demons by making amends to her sister that force her to make contact with her long-lost niece, an action that tears her niece’s family apart through her own misguided notions.

In this novel, the search for a sense of belonging – the validation of the importance of the cultural lives, expressions and experiences of immigrants living in a foreign land – is primarily a response to the feelings of loss and hopelessness that plague many persons who live away from their native land. Sharanjeet experiences feelings of hopelessness due to the loss of her maternal family and also because her plans for starting a new family are ruined because of her barrenness. It is this feeling of frustration that strengthens her will to keep on searching for her sister’s child. Hence, Sharanjeet yearns for a sense of belonging in the strange new land that she inhabits. She repeatedly tries to seek her past and rip off pieces from it to place them in her present. Her struggle to reclaim her lost family finally pays off for she gets to meet her niece, Nimmo. And she even succeeds in being allowed, after a lot of persuasion, to raise the young woman’s son, Jasbeer. Here
Sharanjeet’s feelings of hopelessness are an instance of inner personal violence as they become the cause of her misery and alienate her from the environment she inhabits. Also, her frustration blinds her to the pain that she causes to her niece through her callous demand to take Jasbeer with her to Canada. She is willing to resort to all kinds of trickery to make sure that Jasbeer never goes back to India. She deliberately conceals his misbehaviour and misdeeds from Nimmo’s family so that they never ask her to return their son. A resentful and deeply unhappy Jasbeer finally gets to vent his anger by participating in the violent Sikh separatist movement.

In Canada, Jasbeer frantically seeks a sense of belonging in an environment that is completely alien to him. His need to belong, at a certain level, a response to his feeling of being a victim at the hands of his family; the eleven years old Jasbeer was shipped off to Canada to live with the childless Sharanjeet after she put pressure on her niece to let her raise one of her children. Nimmo reluctantly obliges her aunt in return for the monetary help she has received from her. This move, however, proves to be disastrous for everyone involved as Nimmo loses all contact with her son for several years while Sharanjeet too never gains the satisfaction of being a mother because Jasbeer – angered over his separation from his familial roots – refuses to forge a relationship with his new family. This experience of uprootedness which Jasbeer undergoes is an extremely violent experience. The violence which explains Jasbeer’s sense of being uprooted lies in his parents’ act of forcibly dispatching him with Sharanjeet. His pleas to let him stay fall on deaf ears and he, consequently, feels that his parents have violated the bonds of love that bound them all together. As a result, he harbours acute feelings of resentment
towards his parents and declines every opportunity to communicate with them. On the other hand, he also refuses to adjust to his new environment. He is plagued with a deep sense of alienation which makes him wander aimlessly, doing nothing and purposely trying to fail in everything. It is this feeling of alienation and uprootedness that, firstly, turns him towards self-destruction and, later on, towards the infliction of violence on others.

In the novel, Jasbeer represents all those young hot-blooded men who get seduced by the rhetoric of violence mouthed by those who claim to be rebels, revolutionaries and insurrectionists fighting against all kinds of injustices. He gets completely swayed by the violent rants of the radical preacher called Dr. Raghubir Randhawa who comes to Vancouver in order to incite the Canadian Sikhs to come and join the Sikhs’ violent efforts to form a new homeland called Khalistan. Jasbeer becomes a victim of this discourse of separatism because of his vulnerability and the feeling of abandonment that resides in his heart because of his separation from his family. In an attempt to emerge from this sense of abandonment that pervades his mind, the final recourse that he takes is to violence. Badami’s delineation of Jasbeer’s character, thus, shows the violence that is inflicted on the individual because of the alienation and the sense of being violated as well as the violent choices that one willingly makes in response to such situations.

Analysis of the novel also brings to light the patriarchal violence with its roots in racism. The theme of racist discrimination is first introduced in the narrative through Badami’s depiction of interracial nuptials between a German woman called Rosa Schweers and Hari Shastri who is of South Indian origin. Hari’s family is steeped in Hindu culture and believes that he has committed a
heinous crime by marrying a “casteless” woman who follows a different religion and has no family that can attest to her breeding (77). They treat Rosa as an “outsider”, and Hari’s mother always launches into a tirade of abuses whenever she catches sight of her white daughter-in-law. The violence that is perpetrated against Rosa on the basis of her colour, her religion, her way of living, initially makes her fight back in response to her victimization. But she finally admits defeat in the face of constant discrimination by her in-laws and the lack of support from her husband, and so retreats into her own world of misery and unhappiness. It is only in death that she attains freedom from the state of wretchedness that her in-laws have imposed on her. After Rosa’s death, the Shastri family transfers their feelings of antagonism and hatred towards her daughter, Leela.

Leela is labelled by her grandmother as a “half-and-half,” a nickname that is quickly picked up by her cousins in order to continuously taunt her about her mixed racial background and also to make sure that she realizes that she needs to accept the fact that it is her fate to keep hovering outside “the family’s circle of love” (74). Here the author highlights the violence that is attached to racial exclusiveness for it takes away the life of Leela’s mother, leaving the little girl completely vulnerable to her grandmother’s viciousness. The depiction of the vituperative matriarch of the Shastri clan also highlights the double standards inherent in religious beliefs where the notion of hatred for anything different from one’s own values overrides and obliterates the lesson of piety and compassion for everyone that is taught by religions. Hence, religion is shown to be an essentially patriarchal institution which promotes intolerance of ethnic differences and becomes an agent of violence against
women who are different from the community in which they reside. In the instance of Rosa, the violence that targets her is the product of rage directed against her on the basis of difference of religion, caste and race. The victimization of Leela, on the other hand, shows that it is almost impossible to erase these violent and prejudiced notions because they are the creation of a power-driven patriarchal ideology which has a stranglehold on the minds of individuals.

The novel also highlights the adverse effect that such victimization has on a young child as it creates a deep sense of inferiority in her and forces her to prematurely cross the threshold of adulthood. Henceforth, Leela becomes as wily and cunning as young Sharanjeet for she cleverly grabs her father’s affection as well as his purse-strings and, consequently, undermines her grandmother’s authority over him. Most actions of Leela are attempts to overcome the feelings of inadequacy that are a residue of her miserable childhood. She considers marriage to a prosperous groom to be the only way of extracting herself from the peripheral position that has been assigned to her since birth. It is this hunger to establish herself as a whole entity that makes her ensnare Balu Bhat for he belongs to an illustrious South Indian family. The fear of an encounter with her marginalized status forces Leela to sever all ties with her maternal home, after which she proudly parades herself through society as the daughter-in-law of the well-known family of Kunjoor Bhtags. The fear of being marginalized is precisely the reason for her devastation at the news that her husband wants her and the children to migrate to Canada. The cycle of violence is repeated when Leela inflicts her own prejudiced notions on to her future daughter-in-law. She refuses to accept the white
girlfriend of his son with open arms and criticizes her for her attempt to place herself in two different worlds. The scars of her marginalization and victimization run deep and her encounter with her son’s girlfriend reopens the old wounds, making her lash out at the young woman for bringing back all the depressing memories.

*Can You Hear the NightBird Call?* is also filled with instances of explicit violence which resulted from the political turmoil and communal riots that took place in post-independence India. Badami gives a heart-rendering description of the plight of people who were caught in the cross-fire of communal violence that erupted at once after the decision taken by political leaders to divide India in 1947. In the scene where a young Nimmo is hiding in the wheat-storage bin while her mother gets raped and brutally murdered by the angry and vengeful people, Badami skillfully captures the victimization and dehumanization of innocent people who were made a scapegoat to the sadism and misguided notions of two warring communities during the Partition.

Another example of political violence in the novel is the declaration of a state of emergency in India by Indira Gandhi in 1975. Badami shows the positive aspect of the emergency rule where she narrates that its imposition has brought an improvement in the management of social and economic centers as everything runs smoothly for fear of incurring the wrath of the government. The flip side of this state of emergency is, however, extremely violent and frightening. Sunny, Nimmo’s nephew by marriage, is a youth who strongly protests against Indira Gandhi’s strong-arm political tactics. He gets angry over the fact that many people consider the violence that is reflected in
the suspension of all constitutional rights as well as the unreasonable interrogation, imprisonment and killing of people, to be a beneficial aspect of the country. Giorgio Agamben terms this phenomenon of emergency as the “state of exception” where the State prohibits individuals to commit violence but grants itself the right to exercise it in the name of law. According to him, this state of exception has become the “dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics” and has, consequently, marred the distinction between democracy and absolutism (2).

Indira Gandhi is shown in the novel as declaring a state of emergency in response to the charges of electoral malpractices levelled against her. But before the law can take its course against her, she suspends the entire legal system of the country. Agamben states that such situations expose the lawlessness that lies at the heart of law. It involves the suspension of the constitution and the negation of the legal rights of those individuals who are in detention or surveillance. The state of exception thus opens a no-man’s-land between the political and the judicial. Agamben considers the state of exception to be a “catastrophe” for it violates the rights of people on legal as well as humanitarian grounds (3). The state of exception is, in his view, the employment of a drastic and violent measure as the government divests the imprisoned individuals of their legal as well as human identity, labelling them as an “alien” or “detainee” (3).

Badami’s treatment of the anti-Sikh riots that took place in 1984 also highlights the manner in which political events instigate communities to inflict violence on their acquaintances, friends and neighbours as well as on strangers. In these riots, thousands of Sikhs were killed as an act of revenge
for Indira Gandhi’s assassination based on the fact that the guards who killed her belonged to the Sikh community. The brutal murders of Nimmo’s husband and young son and daughter bring to light the way in which innocent and unsuspecting individuals are subjected to gross acts of violence that they have done nothing to deserve. The act of setting several of the turbaned men in Delhi on fire shows the unreasonableness and senselessness of violence. In *The Ground of the Image*, Nancy states that “violence does not participate in any order of reason….it has no interest in knowing….it is not interested in being anything but this ignorance or deliberate blindness….it is [in fact] the calculated absence of thought willed by a rigid intelligence” (16-17).

Similarly, this novel highlights the meaninglessness of violence which led to the killing of Sikhs as an act of revenge. It lays bare the perverseness that forced some angry Canadian Sikhs to bomb the Air India flight in 1985 and kill several of their nation’s citizens avenge the anti-Sikh violence of 1984. The novel also criticizes the manipulative actions of individuals like Dr. Randhawa who use political and communal violence for their own personal, political and economic purposes.

Badami’s narrative thus highlights the manner in which entire families are wiped out in violence fanned by people with political aspirations and warped ideologies who successfully convince others to fight their battles for them. She also focusses on the way in which oppressive emotions of hopelessness, frustration, alienation and sense of violation, propel an individual towards self-destruction as well as infliction of violence on others. Even though Badami concentrates primarily on the trials and tribulations of three women, namely Sharanjeet Kaur, Leela Bhat and Nirmaljeet Kaur, she
never tries to show that men are able to escape unscathed from the blows of violence. The brutal killings of Nimmo’s husband Satpal Singh, her son Pappu, and Sharanjeet’s husband Khushwant Singh represents the killings of all the Sikhs who were victimized and dehumanized in the mad violence that ensued Indira Gandhi’s assassination.

Badami’s main focus is, however, on the exposure of the anguish of those women who witness their families being torn asunder in conflicts but are powerless to do anything about it. The author gives a soul-stirring account of the three females in the novel who are forcibly dragged into the circle of violence by circumstances. The novel throws light on the victimization of women that occurs amidst the violent acts including those that are carried out at the instigation of politicians. Nimmo, in the aftermath of Sikh killings in India, is shown to have completely lost her grip on reality for she eagerly awaits her dead family members to return at any moment. The murder of her husband forces the previously apolitical Indian-born Canadian resident Sharanjeet Kaur to get involved in the political agenda of radical Sikh separatists and to spout hatred against her own native land and against other communities of Indian origin. But the most traumatic experience is that of Leela who is shown to have distanced herself from political conflicts her entire life yet in the end is undeservingly made a target of the hatred that she has done nothing to provoke. The tragic tales of these three women and their families resonate, in Badami’s view, with the present times where every one has been affected by and infected with irrational violence backed by seemingly rational ideologies.
This novel is, in Badami’s view, a product of her fear of the present political environment where violence is at its peak and terrorism has reared its ugly, ruthless and deadly head (“Straddling Two Worlds”). An Indian-born Canadian resident, Badami has, however, stuck to her roots and has grounded her story in the historical events that took place in India and Canada and brought about a violent change in the lives of several citizens of both nations. In a radio interview, Badami said that she was compelled to write about the 1984 anti-Sikh riots because of the haunting images of her encounter with the blood-bath and brutal killings of Sikhs which, she claimed, were still fresh in her mind. She also lost someone she personally knew in the tragic killing of hundreds of people during the bombing of the Air India flight that took place in 1985 (The Book Show). Her close brush with terrorism thus forced Badami to portray, with utmost sensitivity, the misery of those people whose lives are invaded by violence even when they had not done anything to deserve it.

A detailed analysis of Can You Hear the NightBird Call?, however, reveals Badami to be lacking in powerful treatment of the havoc that is wreaked in the lives of people who are made to bear the brunt of terrorism. She claims to uncover the legacy of violence that was left to people who witnessed and experienced the brutality of the communal riots that took place during Partition. Badami, however, fails to depict the ferocity and the madness that was an integral part of the violence that erupted post-independence. Similarly, her account of the Air India bombing is also inadequate and even tame as it fails to make the reader fully empathize with the situation. Badami, however, claims that it was a conscious decision on her part to remove some of the details of the gory acts of violence from the novel because she feared
that the readers might not be able to stomach the descriptions of the immense bloodshed. The decision to refrain from the depiction of a historical situation in all its reality alludes to Badami’s own attempt to conceal the “real” by giving the excuse that its disclosure might be a painful experience for everybody.

Literature is a form of art that stages a naked confrontation with raw violence. A perusal of the works of prolific short-story writer Saadat Hasan Manto gives a clear picture of the remorseless cold-bloodedness that was behind the violent murders, rapes and mutilations that took place during Partition. In his stories, Manto focusses both on the explicit acts of brutality as well as the experiences of covert violence that were rarely documented. In one of his stories entitled “The Return”, he talks about the plight of a man named Sirajuddin, who helplessly searches for his young daughter in the streets of the riot-ravaged Lahore. He is finally able to locate her at a hospital where he comes to know about her traumatized state because of her rape at the hands of her abductors as well as those who rescue her. Sirajuddin, however, completely ignores the damage that has been done to his daughter’s psyche and is happy that at least she is physically alive (*Mottled Dawn* 11-14). His story “Toba Tek Singh” is about the falsity of man-made borders where even the inmates of a mental asylum are divided on the basis of their communities so that the authorities can ship the Muslim inmates to the newly formed Pakistan (1-10). As discussed in one of the previous chapters, “Colder Than Ice” is another chilling tale about the degeneration of a society in conflict, is the story of a man who does not lose sleep even after murdering several people but who finally realizes his depravity after trying to rape the dead body of a
young girl (23-28). Badami’s depiction of the violent sweep of history in India, on the other hand, seems comparatively very tame and lacks the passion required to highlight the reality of violence that has gradually evolved over all these years and become even more threatening and all-pervasive. She tampers with reality in her refusal to take sides in the Hindu-Sikh conflict and fails to take the demon of terrorism by its horns because she wants to make her writing acceptable for the average reader of diasporic literature. Badami’s narrative is thus infested with ideological silences that become evident through her inability to delve into the lived histories of those people who were killed or who barely managed to survive in those dark periods of anomy and violence (Eagleton 35). This detection of silences imposed by an ideology on any given text points to the violence that is perpetrated by the text itself. Hence, Badami’s narrative becomes an instance of authorial and textual violence also.

Badami creates a very horrifying but extremely brief scenario of violence in the novel. She promises her readers a very close insight into the lives that have been torn asunder by violence but, ultimately, she fails to adequately deliver on her promise. Her writing style is ornate and she skillfully makes use of the art of symbolism in order to lend poignancy to her novel. It is this concentration on creating a beautiful prose that makes her skip over many issues of confrontation with violence. This makes her literary work a product of alienation. According to Sartre, “Literature of a given age is alienated when it has not arrived at the explicit consciousness of its autonomy and when it submits to temporal powers or to an ideology, in short, when it considers itself as a means and not an unconditioned end” (What is Literature? 117). Literature becomes conscious of its own power for bringing about a
change only when the writer represents the reality of the situation without being influenced by existing ideologies. In Sartre’s view, literature should not be a sedative or a feel-good pill but an irritant that provokes people to realize their condition and strive to transcend it. The climax of Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?, for instance, certainly feels like an attempt on the author’s part to end the novel albeit forcibly on a positive note. Hence, Badami too becomes a perpetrator of violence because of her steadfast refusal to confront the brutal truth that she herself promised to uncover. Her intentions as a writer are creditable, yet she gets caught in the dilemma that many individuals face, that is, between a head-on confrontation with violent reality that is quite painful and glossing over the naked truth of raw, soul-searing violence in order to spare everyone the misery implied in such a situation. Badami’s work remains stuck in this predicament of following one of the two above-said choices that, consequently, it forces her away from the role of a “committed” writer who never compromises on her determination for the disclosure and depiction of reality because only revelation, according to Sartre, can herald change in society. Badami, by refusing to make the right choice in her capacity as a writer, exerts a form of authorial violence, thereby doing disservice to her vocation as well as to the avid readers.