Partition of India was a traumatic event whose repercussions continue to impact South Asian subjectivities in complex ways, and that is why the partition has been a recurrent motif in Indian-English fiction as well as in writings by Indian diaspora. This article attempts to read partition in Anita Rau Badami’s novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) as an unclosed chapter in Indian History recuperating itself with slightest provocation. I strongly believe that political interests have always played their role in instigating and exploiting communal violence for political gains, a trend which started with Muslim League giving its direct action call on August 16, 1946 for partition. It has been furthered by the local political and economic factors in independent India and perpetuated by the emergence of Hindutva politics in the last two decades. But my article does not intend to interrogate the cause of the endless partition; instead it focuses on the effect it produces on our lives. I also seek to explore the juxtaposition of the diasporic theme of inbetweenness with the (continuing) partition of India in Badami’s novel which points at the interconnectedness between the two.

Set in both India and Canada, the canvas of *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* spans a fairly long stretch of history from 1928 to 1986, the years through which India witnessed the partition of 1947. It followed a rapid changing political scenario with the two wars with Pakistan, separation of Bangladesh, fight over Kashmir, death of Nehru, Indira Gandhi as India’s first woman Prime Minister, the demand for Khalistan, Mrs Gandhi’s government’s “Operation Blue Star” in the premises of the Golden Temple, the retaliation of the Sikhs by assassination of Mrs. Gandhi, followed by the massacre of the Sikhs in the country. It followed the blast of Air-India’s Boeing 747, Kanishka, on its way from Toronto to India on June 23, 1985, killing all the 329 people on board, supposedly by the Sikh extremists. Badami’s partition novel is unique for it shows us that all these events were painful legacies of the partition.

The novel weaves these historical and political events around the personal life of three female protagonists, Sharanjeet Kaur known as Bibi-ji in Vancouver, Leela Bhat, her neighbour from Bangalore to the same city in Canada and Nimmo, Bibiji’s niece, who is orphaned by the devastation that engulfed India after the partition, is now rebuilding her life in Delhi. Their destinies are intimately intertwined by coincidence and the succession of violence. Though the novel is seemingly chronological, its structure replicates the interconnectedness of *Indra’s net*. For
Badami, the idea of interconnectedness between home and diaspora, past and present, is captured metaphorically in a striking passage fairly early in the novel. The little girl Preethi (Leela’s daughter) is gazing at the night-scene below her from the window of her plane:

‘Amma,’ she said . . . ‘what does node mean?’

‘It means where two or three things cross,’ said Leela.

She examined the book curiously. ‘What are you reading?’

‘About Indra’s Net,’ Preethi said. ‘Do you know this story, Amma?’

‘No, I don’t.’ Leela stroked the child’s soft hair. ‘Why don’t you read it to me?’

‘Indra, the god of heaven flung a net over the world,’ read Preethi . . .

‘Its shining strands criss-crossed the world from end to end. At each node of this net there hung a gem, so arranged that if you looked at one you saw all the others reflected in it. As each gem reflected the other one, so was every human affected by the miseries and joys of every other human, every other living thing on the planet. When one gem was touched, hundreds of others shimmered or danced in response, and a tear in the net made the whole world tremble.” (Emphasis added, 105-06)

Following this one thread of Indra’s net provides us with both a conceptual framework and a model for reading the novel. It inscribes a relationship between individual and collective that reflects the negotiation between diverse influences of multiple collectives through the specific location of the individual as agent. The theory that every human is affected by the miseries and joys of every other human brings us the point that the partition experience that is fear of losing one’s own identity, dislocation, alienation, discrimination, problem of duality, etc. can be experienced with all its horror by the immigrants in distant lands as well which reflects the interconnectedness of their existence.

The novel opens with an account of the Komagata Maru incident that conjures up an image of the ship’s passengers suspended between two nations on either side of the Pacific Ocean. Among the passengers aboard the Komagata Maru is a Sikh, Harjot Singh; who, the novel tells us, is in 1928, still unable to forget his experience of racial abjection at the Canadian border, and wonders why he and the other passengers on the Komagata Maru, everyone of them British citizens, had been refused entry to Canada. His daughter Sharanjeet inherits her father’s dream. She steals the heart of her sister’s fiancé and becomes Bibi-ji by marrying Khushwant Singh (called Pa-ji by everyone in the novel), who is settled in Canada. She successfully runs their café Delhi Junction at Vancouver which acts as a neutral zone, a third space where she offers free advice to the new immigrants (60) and brings about the feeling of a secular community where Muslims and Hindus as well as white Canadians and non-white Canadians can tread about as equals.

The turn of events at home gets reflected in life at Vancouver and the Delhi Junction. When China invades India in 1962 and Nehru dies a year after, the regulars at Delhi Junction are unanimous in their belief that Chinese invasion has killed Nehru and they all refuse to patronize Mrs Wu’s vegetable shop. (66) When Nehru’s daughter Indira Gandhi becomes the (Prime minister) of India in 1967, Bibi-ji celebrates by distributing sweets to everyone to show her loyalty lies with India, not Pakistan though her native place vanishes somewhere in the India–Pakistan border. In 1965, when war breaks out between
India and Pakistan the seating map in Delhi Junction alters and Hafeez and Ali bhai move defensively to a separate table from Indian group. (67) During 1971 war, they are absent from their usual table. (249)

Bibi-ji’s own religious liberalism and personal affiliation undergo change after Pa-ji becomes a victim of military action in the premises of Golden Temple following Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her Sikh bodyguards during a short visit to India. The violence of Pa-ji’s death triggers Bibi-ji’s shifting allegiance from being a non-Khalistan supporter to being a Khalistan supporter. She forgets to remember the wisdom of Rani Miss, a school teacher whom she met in the premises of Golden Temple, “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) Her desire to fund the Khalistan movement does not spring from the desire for an imaginary homeland. Rather, her decision is based on personal motivation based on revenge for Pa-ji’s death. Despite her earlier disapproval of Dr. Randhawa and his views on Khalistan, she welcomes him into her home, and uses violence to reason away Pa-ji’s violent (albeit accidental) death. Ironically on 15 August the Sikhs in Vancouver takes a protest march against military action in Golden Temple and Bibi-ji gets some solace. The tension between Hindus and Sikhs now features at Delhi Junction café and there is split again between “us and them.” (341)

Leela falls prey to rupture and partition of another kind. Trauma of inbetweenness chases her throughout her life. Being born half-and-half of a highcaste Hindu Brahmin father and a “casteless German” mother (77), Leela marries into the family of the Bhats, a high class Bhahmin family to overcome the state of inbetweenness. But inbetweenness of another kind is waiting for her. Leela moves to Vancouver with her husband and becomes a neighbour of Bibi-ji. While adjusting to life at Vancouver, she constantly longs to visit India. Her longing can be compared to the Pakistani driver’s wife’s wish to visit India in Ashraf’s story “Separated from the Flocks.” The driver’s wife against her husband’s wishes pleads with the civil servant to get her a travel pass so she can visit her native place in India, which happens to be in the civil servant’s own home state (qtd. in Marangoly George). In the same story the civil servant refuses to shoot at the migrating birds in a duck shoot as he himself is separated from his flock and has experienced the trauma of displacement. However, in the end of Badami’s story, Leela manages to set out for her “home” for the first time after 18 years since her arrival in Canada, but ends a victim of the 1985 Air India 182 Bombing, on her way. Bibi-ji’s behaviour is in direct contrast to the civil servant’s. She knew that it was not safe to fly Air India, but thought “it was none of her business what happened to them” (383) and Leela falls a victim to communal violence. The binary of ‘us’ and ‘them’ has a number of resonance in the novel – Hindu/ Muslim, Hindu/ Sikh, Indians/ Anglo-Indians, Indian diaspora/ Canadian natives, etc. pointing at the endless partitions of hearts.

Rosemary Marangoly George in her article “(Extra) Ordinary Violence: National Literatures, Diasporic Aesthetics, and the Politics of Gender in South Asian Partition Fiction” makes a significant observation:

But what, one might ask, is gained from reading Partition fiction through the lens of diaspora-plus-nation? Read in purely nationalist terms, Partition was a once-in-a-nation’s-lifetime event: it was the downside of achieving independence for India and
the cost of establishing Pakistan. Thus, in terms of national history this Partition is firmly in the past and will not be repeated . . . If we read them through a diasporic lens, such partitions and dislocations are routinely replayed from the beginning of settled societies to the present day. Framed in this context of trading diasporas, indentureship, evictions, forced/economic migrations, and dislocations, this Partition becomes less of a singular event in a national history and more liable to be repeated in varying form and degree. (141)

Clearly, the birth of the two nations in this case cannot be separated from the birth of the two diasporas, because of the mass exodus of population across the borders who were wrenched from one home to a more “fitting” home at partition. In the space of a few months, about twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and the two wings, East and West, of the newly created Pakistan. As Vijay Mishra defines it, diasporas are ethnic groups that, for a variety of reasons, “live in displacement” (423). To contrast with the diasporic subjectivities of both Bibi-ji and Leela, Badami uses the character of Nimmo to show how double displacement can occur within the homeland. While Gayatri Gopinath’s notion of double displacement refers to being physically and metaphorically displaced in the diaspora, Badami challenges this notion through Nimmo’s narrative. Nimmo’s need for an identity is born out of her physical displacement within her homeland as a result of the 1947 mass migration and the disappearance of her entire family following the partition violence. Nimmo’s trauma makes her grab at an identity as a Sikh based on a postcard she happened to be holding onto. She had never told her husband that the postcard might not be hers; that she might have picked it up on her journey to India during partition, twenty years ago. (148) Nimmo experiences a sense of metaphorical displacement in her homeland due to her lack of memories from her childhood. All she remembers are “a pair of feet dangling above a dusty floor, their clean pink soles smelling delicately of lavender soap,” the horrifying scene of her mother committing suicide after being raped during the partition. (158-59)

History repeats and the past re-emerges in the life of Nimmo during the riots of 1984 when she hides her daughter in a cupboard as her mother had hidden her in a barrel of corn, but fails to save her life as it was burnt by the marauders. Nimmo shivered, was the situation of the Sikhs in India so wretched? Could yet another division of the country heal the wounds that had been caused by the first one?” (292)

The wounds that were caused by the partition still fester and give rise to fresh suspicions. The massacre and armed attack on the holy shrine of “the Golden Temple” intensified the dislike of the Sikhs for the government and led to the most shocking incident of the decade — the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards. This in turn triggered off the most savage rampage of Sikh massacre ever known. “For days afterwards Sikhs all over India were attacked in an orgy of violence and revenge. Many homes were destroyed and thousands died. In the outline suburbs of Delhi more than three thousand were killed, often by being doused in kerosene and then set alight.” (Butalia 4) In 1984, the ferocity with which Sikhs were killed in city after city in north India seemed almost as a re-run of the 1947 for them. As Urvashi Butalia puts it, “It took 1984 to make me understand how ever-present Partition was in our lives too, to recognize that it could not be so easily put away inside the covers of history books.” (6) In Badami’s novel in the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, while Bibi-ji loses her husband, Nimmo loses her entire
family (except her son, Jasbeer). This shows that religious violence crosses borders despite their different locations in Vancouver and Delhi, respectively. Nimmo is transformed into a living corpse. It follows the authorial comment, “She is Nirmaljeet Kaur- A woman damaged in places too private to see.” (399)

Communal violence, then, creates a space of instability for women, whether in the homeland or the diaspora. Leela loses her life to communal violence, while Bibi-ji and Nimmo suffer personal losses in the form of the death of their husbands and family. In all the three instances, we see how communal violence cuts through religious, class and geographical locations like Indra’s net and shatters the lives of Indian women in different ways. The violence of partition refuses to stop with the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 or Kanishka Aircrash of 1985 where the narrative time in Badami’s novel stops.

Partition has been ever present in our lives in myriad forms. As Suvir Kaul comments on Train to Pakistan, “We hunger for these stories (of partition) not simply because they address the religious and social divides of a time past but because they engage with painful contemporary realities; the effects of partition of India and Pakistan linger into today, and Mano Majras are still torn apart, literally and figuratively, as they were fifty years ago.” (18) The inter-communal violence that resulted in the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, or the spate of bloodbath that followed the Babri Masjid demolition (1992) and also the Godhra train-burning incident in Gujurat (2002) have made us rethink partition as a recurring event with new inflections of communal divide, suspicion, absence of reason and restraint. In the winter of 1997, India and Pakistan exploded nuclear devices as mutual adversaries. A year later, soldiers of the two countries battled one another in the Himalayan cold in Kargil. Partition violence erupted all over again, re-enacted down to the mutilation of soldiers’ bodies. 1947, thus, seems to be dormant in the collective memory, erupting with slightest provocation. In a post-Sept 11, 2001 world, partition has assumed importance because it has proved that it is dangerous to forget partition as it again reminded the minority of the fear of the majority. As the US and Canada moved to avenge the crime of Sept 11, 2001, vigilantes found a visual link between Bin Laden’s turban and the turbans of Sikh-Americans which followed hundreds of cases of hate crimes against Sikhs and then Muslims in a few weeks.

Badami’s novel, I find, is very important in the genre of partition literature to sensitize us to the terrible human cost of trauma, loss of faith and trust. It alerts us to the dangers of communal passion that surround us now as much as they did in the past. She tries to show us that suffering on account of communal violence has remained unmitigated, for what is shown as happening then is still happening now. Her work provokes to explore the impact partition has on our present. What is still more important is that she raises these issues to problematize the issues of identity of Indian diaspora vis-à-vis women.

Though the night bird’s call in the title portends death and disaster, the novel ends on a positive note. In the end of the story a repentent Jasbeer penned a letter to Preethi in which he described how he had turned into a real monster terrorising people to donate their hard earned money to further their fight for a free country. He had come to realise, “All they wanted was to be left alone to live their lives” (398).

This sentence contains the message of the story. The author speaks through her character here. Badami seems to say that the endless cycle
of revenge and retaliation is counter-productive, that it will only lead to more violence and more bloodshed. If we do not learn lessons from history then we are tend to repeat them as the carnage of 1947 has been repeated in Gujarat, Kashmir and elsewhere many times over in the post-independence period. Even seeking refuge in a third space is not a solution as people’s lives around the world are interconnected. The novel offers a message of religious tolerance, peaceful habitation and cooperative existence uninterfered by separatist forces as a soothing solution to these unhealed wounds.

References:


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**Bowls of Smile and Joy**

*Hansanath Muduli*

Let this Independence day  
Not witness  
Stains of blood  
On the walls of the temples.

Let this Independence day  
Not hear  
Screams of birds  
At the surrounding of the chilika.

Let this Independence day  
Not detect  
Signs of polio  
In the blood sample of any child.

Let this Independence day  
Not find  

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Hansanath Muduli, Khandagiri (Dumuduma – A), Bhubaneswar – 751030.