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Jennifer Randall

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Jostling with Borders: Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

Anita Rau Badami masters the art of ambivalence in her writing. Through a performance of uncanny in-betweenness indebted to Bhabha's "politics of polarity," the narrative spins its way from comedy into mongrel degeneration. The unsuspecting reader slowly comes face-to-face with a lot more than s/he bargained for: a carnival of horrors composed of South Asian communalism and global terrorism, all of which turn up on his front doorstep demanding recognition.

The migrancy of literature has long been a key issue in academic postcolonial studies, encapsulated in Rushdie's description of Indian writers in English as "translated men" (*Imaginary Homelands* 17). A literary piece travels across boundaries, both geographical and cultural, since literature is but the otherness of ourselves, thus risking either a loss or a gain in translation. As such, literature takes on a life of its own; it can be inflated or deflated through interpretation. The novel is a literary form particularly susceptible to this re-modeling. As Tiphaine Samoyault observes in *L'Excès du roman*, "the novel is the world of excess, excess is the world of the novel" (my translation, 7), in that it overflows with meaning and *spills* out of itself. Samoyault affirms that contrary to short stories or poems, novels lack closure and the mere act of reading is time- and self-consuming. Extending this line of thought, the novel's commitment to discourse is such that the mere fact of writing a novel constitutes a folly, an excess of meaning, and yet also, an excess of fiction which flows over into the truth.

The novelistic form, it has often been noted by critics, is particularly suited to the postcolonial writing of displacement, nostalgia, or disenchantment, topics which refer to the transgression of the national ideal as much as to that of the literary norm itself. The fresh-off-the-boat migrant is confronted with excess which, soon enough, equates to emptiness, a loss in translation which suggests the inflationary/deflationary quality of border-crossing. The monetary connotations in these binary terms of loss/gain also serve to remind us that a cultural transaction takes place during the crossing, which itself is often spurred by economic reasons. Yet migration is neither straightforward nor one-way, for the traveller brings with him/her elements of culture which in turn are capable of underlining not only horror back at home, but the monstrosity of a neo-imperialist Western system which brought about the act of crossing in the first place. The multicultural hybrid moves away from a celebratory dimension towards a monstrous one, a suggestion increasingly emphasized by contemporary Indo-hyphenated writers. This monstrous inflation-deflation of borders shall be examined in the context of a recent novel published in 2006, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

Can You Hear the Nightbird Call? is the third novel of Indo-Canadian author Anita Rau Badami whose craft consists in weaving stories around the hybrid lives of migrants of Indian origin. The storyline brings together the lives of three women who gradually get to know each other as the narrative develops through a "butterfly effect" logic spanning the 1920s, as the first Indians started migrating to Canada, to 1985, the year of the terrorist bombing of Air India flight 182 between Canada and India.

A brief summary of the novel can help us understand the intertwining dynamics of three women's lives in the text. The first character is Bibi-ji, a well-established and larger-than-life matriarch of the Sikh community of Vancouver, whose bubbly character hides her deep-rooted mourning over the loss of her sister Kanwar who died during the Partition in 1947 in India. She later becomes the landlady of Leela, a "half-breed" (82) born of a German mother and an Indian father, and rejected by both worlds. Leela migrates to Canada in the 1960s and is obsessed with in-betweenness, following the lack of rootedness which marked her childhood. She is the bridge between Bibi-ji and the third character Nimmo, who is none other than Kanwar's daughter. Within Nimmo lingers the fear of losing everything she has built – her family, her home – ever since the massacre of her loved ones when she was a child in 1947. Nimmo's family is in financial difficulty, and when Bibi-ji appears and bails them out, the latter, a barren woman, demands that they hand their first son Jasbeer over to her, promising to give him a better life in Canada. Yet Jasbeer never accepts what he sees as an act of treason on the part of his real and adoptive mothers. As he grows up, he turns towards a form of extreme Sikhism, one which promotes the necessity of Khalistan, a separate land for the Sikhs of India, which is his way of coming to terms with his lack of identity in a foreign world.

The backdrop to these criss-crossing lives is the increasing tension in India due to the State's discrimination against Sikhs in the second half of the twentieth century. These tensions find a direct echo among the Sikh community of Vancouver, concentrated at the Delhi Junction, the restaurant run by Bibi-ji and her husband Pa-ji. The tensions escalate with the Amritsar massacre in the Golden Temple in 1984, during which Indira Gandhi's army stormed into the Sikh Golden Temple and gunned down over 2,000 believers in a military operation to weed out the extremist Sikh rebels. Bibi-ji and her husband were amongst the pilgrims, and Pa-ji gets killed. Upon her return to Canada, a grief-stricken Bibi-ji transforms her home into a breeding ground for Sikh fundamentalists. After Indira Gandhi is murdered by her two Sikh bodyguards in 1984, India and its diaspora enter into a communal frenzy. Uncountable Sikhs throughout the world are murdered, including Nimmo's husband, son and daughter in India, each of whom dies in atrocious conditions.

Leela happens to choose this moment to go back to India after seventeen years of homesickness to visit her relatives – only her plane never reaches its destination: she is on Air India flight 182, and dies in the Sikh terrorist explosion. It is suggested at the end of the novel that Bibi-ji, Leela's Sikh friend transformed by her sorrow, knew of the planned attacks but chose not to warn her former friend, who is henceforth nothing more for her than a Hindu enemy. The narrative ends on a note of nothingness, saying of Bibi-ji that "[s]he felt as if the world that she had known for so long, the stable, safe world, had been blown apart, leaving only smoky puffs of whispering, poisonous rumours" (375).

The question I would like to ask stems from that put by Pnina Werbner in her essay "The Limits of Cultural Hybridity": "When and why do hybrid postcolonial novels cease to be funny and entertaining and become deeply offensive?" (143). The "offensive" dimension of this literature is related to the crossing of an unspoken of yet agreed upon boundary. It refers us to the politically committed charge contained in the narrative. This paper explores the complex interplay of polarity and in-betweenness

in Badami's novel, what I would describe as "jostling with borders," in reference to the sense of international insecurity which Bibi-ji's character equates to "fiddling with borders" (257). The power of distortion engaged by intradiegetic and metadiegetic discourse becomes a performative act, questioning and subverting pre-constructed ideas, or as Homi Bhabha formulates it, "interrupt[ing] the performance of the present" (*The Location of Culture* 7) since "[t]he borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present". As such, polyphonic narratives produce new interpretations of the world. To that effect, all boundaries become porous, including those of contemporary international geopolitics which, because they have been drawn according to the priorities of Nation-States, do not readily accommodate the needs of trans migratory identities.

An Inflatable Comedy

In *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call*, spaces, nations, and time-frames are viewed as sealed-off modules. Characters who try to emigrate at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Bibi-ji's father, find themselves denied entry into the New World. In India, society is seen as a grid within which each caste, gender, religion, and class has its own place. Needless to say, contagion is simply not an issue in this compartmentalized world. Bibi-ji, who twenty years after her own father *does* manage to migrate to Canada, does her utmost to become more Indian than the Indians, relishing the authenticity of the Indian products she sells in her convenience store on Main Street. Yet the Indianness she aspires to owes its appeal to the distance that separates her from her homeland. Likewise, when the community hears about Partition, the news is not first perceived as a direct threat since what happens in India initially seems irrelevant to these new immigrants to Canada. Furthermore what they hear on the BBC is but a faint and crackling sound on the radio, an impersonal message which renders the implications of such violence difficult to relate to, so predominant is the message of the sub-continent's victorious independence rather than its massacres.¹ As such, the division between the two territories is initially based on order and nation-building, an idea reflected in the matter-of-fact tone of the extradiegetic voice and the emphasis it places on cartographic divisions:

An Englishman, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, had been appointed in the days before independence to head a commission that would create two nations in the subcontinent – India, with a Hindu majority, and Pakistan, for the Muslims. Most of West Punjab, with its Muslim majority, would go to Pakistan, as would East Bengal on the other side of India. East Punjab, with its Hindu and Sikh majority, would remain part of India. (51)

Within this framework, Leela is an anomaly within the system because of her mixed origins, and she has no other choice but to remain an out-caste to all, a significant fact in Hindu society which is regulated by impenetrable rules of inclusion and exclusion. When Leela does marry into an eminent Brahmin family, she seals off the margins around her, and takes pride in conforming to her in-laws' standards. After moving to

1. This obliviousness to violence is illustrated later still in the narrative by Nimmo, who struggles to protect her family by sealing off the boundaries of her house and windows with black tape and claiming until just before the attackers descend on the Sikh community in 1984: "We live in Delhi. It is not our problem" (296).

Canada – against her own will – she immediately strives to carve out a new home for herself:

She would cut this New World into the shape that she wished it to be, pull at the edges that didn't match the pattern of her memories and rename it. She would redraw maps and mythologies like the settlers who came before her [...]. Like them, she would make this corner of the world her own until it was time to return home. (111)

The tailoring metaphor indicates the power of fiction to “design a new self” and to disregard political borders in the fashioning of personal “mythologies,” in an ironic reversal of colonialism. This compartmentalization between self and space recalls Bhabha's idea of the performative enunciation of “culture” (“The Other Question” 124).

The sealed-off atmosphere here cushions the narrative with a seemingly apolitical, if not happily carefree, dimension played out in the first half of the novel, since within Canada, “gora” (white) and “desi” (Indian) cultures simply cannot come to terms with their differences, resulting in hilarious passages whereby lifestyles are incompatible, and middle-class women from both sides are flabbergasted by the customs of their counterparts. Cultural traits are blown up, giving way to exaggerated representations of history, religion, and culture. Bibi-ji and her husband acquire a house which they name the Taj Mahal, and turn it into a Mickey-Mouse version of the latter. The plump and jolly matriarch is compared by her new friend Leela to a Bollywood film-star, so dolled-up and “Punjabized” is she. The most striking figure, however, is Colonel Hunt, a relic from Britain's colonial past who insists on coming once a week to the Delhi Junction Restaurant for his lunch although he abhors everything Indian:

“That's Colonel Samuel Hunt,” Balu murmured in Leela's ear. “A real character. You will see. Endless stories about native rebellions and British bravery.”
“Ridiculous! Intolerable!” the old man spluttered. (122)

The original India is lost in translation to the *goras*, fascinated as they are by their visions of Indian women in terms of sati victims and child brides. But the homeland is also lost to the *desis*, faintly recalled in a frozen, idealistic manner, so obsessed are they with cricket and cultural purity, and competing amongst each other to determine who is the most Indian of them all. In return, Canada seems to those who have stayed at home like a distorted distant land, with the disfigured “Trontooo” being how the cab-driver on the way to the airport calls the Canadian city (103).

The inflating of cultural discrepancies is frequent in popular entertainment,² and it also lies at the heart of the comical dimension of the novel, if we think of comedy in terms of a disjunction between two or more registers. When Jasbeer's parents encounter the school principal, the comic tone (other than the debasing play with the name “bottom” and undergarments) is based on *double-entendres*:

“Mr and Mrs Singh,” the principal said sternly, “we do not tolerate violence in this school. It is a firm policy. [...] I understand that in your part of the world it is ok to carry swords, but –”

2. In British English culture, for example, a whole network of popular entertainment has developed in the past ten to fifteen years, pioneered by a handful of actors, screenwriters and playwrights, gravitating essentially around the two most famous personalities: Meera Syal and Sanjeev Bhaskar. A host of sitcoms (*Goodness Gracious Me*), comedy drama (*The Indian Doctor*), comedy talk-shows (*The Kumars at No.42*), films (*Bend it Like Beckham*), stand-up comedy shows (comedian Vir Das took the Edinburgh Festival Fringe by storm in 2010 with his show *Walking On Broken Das*), more often than not focus on cultural discrepancies encountered by first- and second-generation British Indians in their daily life.

"Our part of the world?" interrupted Bibi-ji. "No, there you have made a mistake, Mr. Longman."

"Longbottom," the principal corrected her.

"Mr. Longbottom. On Main Street we are *very* law-abiding citizens. Nobody carries weapons. [...]"

"No, Mrs Singh. I don't mean Main Street." The principal sounded weary.

[...] "Not Main Street? Then whatever are you meaning, Mr. Longmantle?"

"Longbottom, Mrs. Singh. Why, the *Poonjab*, of course," the principal's left eye twitched.

"I realize it is part of the Sikh religion to carry swords – or is it knives – and grow long hair and..."

[...] He checked his notes and forged on: "... wear a steel bracelet and underwear." Another look at his notes to be sure that it was indeed underwear – possibly steel underwear – that a true believer wore.

Bibi-ji glared at the principal. "*Punjab*," she said. As in *fun*, as in *sun*, as in *bun*." (210-1)

Several cultural registers meet and come into play in this extract. The muddling-up of the five articles of faith followed by Sikh believers to which pertain the carrying of a *kirpan* (a dagger or sword), a *kachera* (a piece of undergarment), a *kara* (a steel bracelet), and *kesh* (the uncutting of one's hair), culminates with the reduction of their sacredness in an absurd surmise ("possibly steel underwear"). But a second discrepancy is at play: the dichotomy between how the Sikhs perceive themselves, as "law-abiding citizens" living on *Main Street*, and the cultural oddities they are inevitably reduced to by the representative of a normative institution. From a narrative perspective, this light-heartedness is prolonged by the fact that in the first half of the novel, the women evolve within the boundaries of a chapter devoted to each of them. They do not interact, and do not know each other, living on different continents and in different times, thus conveying an impression of international consistency, if not security. Yet in the second half, their itineraries and their destinies become inextricably and tragically linked, resulting in death or grief-stricken madness for all those involved.

I believe that this switch in perspective pertains essentially to the fetishisation of culture, the outcome of a political struggle which Bhabha calls the slide from cultural *diversity*, to cultural *difference*, the "*enunciation* of culture as *knowledgeable*," ("Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences" 206-7). Violence thus becomes a symptom of the impact *between* cultures as they shift from diversity to difference.

The Migrant Obsession with In-Betweenness: "Neither here nor there"³

The characters become obsessed with in-betweenness because they are caught in a "discontinuous time of translation and negotiation" (Bhabha, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences" 208). The women all suffer from the Rushdian syndrome of lost homelands, as they are torn between the far-away land of their ancestors and the here-and-now of their children. This strain put upon identity is prolonged throughout the novel by constant references to events leading to the drawing up of new national boundaries, whether it be the creation of Pakistan in 1947, that of Bangladesh in 1971, or the near-creation of Khalistan, a demand which reached its apex in the 1980s. National borders become flexible, a fear expressed by Bibi-ji as the threat arises: "I don't like the idea of more partitions and separations, more fiddling with borders" (257). The epi-

3. "Remember, it's an in-between space. Neither here nor there. It is dangerous," Leela warns her daughter Preethi one day, as she lingers in a door-frame (110).

tome of this fear is Leela, the multi-racial child who is so obsessed with her hybrid state that she is terrified of doorways, lines, nets, and maps, anything that echoes the interstitial dimensions of geography. Her death on Air India flight 182 is the tragic reminder of her lingering in non-space, since after the crash neither the Canadian nor the Indian governments conducted a state mourning for the passengers on board, and she remains, in death, a parent-less child of two nations.

The exploration of the characters' tragic in-betweenness is enhanced by the interconnectedness of world events. The recurring mention of maps, planes, phone calls, and television news accelerates time and abolishes distances. Nimmo wonders at Bibi-ji's ability to "catch" a plane, just as one "catches a bus," she reflects (168). The interconnectedness of things is encapsulated in the child story Leela's daughter is reading on the plane just as they are flying over the Indo-Pakistani border. The story called "Indra's Net" refers to the myth of a net cast over the world by the Gods and which, once torn, "made the whole world tremble" (106).

The Delhi Junction restaurant is initially portrayed as the privileged locus of hybrid interactions where Bibi-ji's gods hang alongside the portraits of popular global icons and Pa-ji's lined-up clocks give the time in all major cities throughout the world. But as technology evolves, the place becomes contaminated by the violent communal tensions that descend upon India. As time goes by, the subcontinent's failure to enact secularism "trickles" (50) into the restaurant, and from the other side of the world, it "sneak[s]" into Nimmo's "small, peaceful world" (275) before hitting them full blast:

In 1965, when war broke out between India and Pakistan, the battle came to the Delhi Junction as well. The seating maps altered [...]. The linoleum floor between them turned into the Line of Control⁴ – an unseen barrier of barbed wire stretching across it, hot lights blazing warnings as soldiers stood guard with guns cocked. Anger, hurt and loss simmered on both sides, conversation between the two factions in the Junction ceased altogether [...]. (66-7)

The phonetic closeness between "linoleum" and "Line of Control" is at the heart of both the displaceability and inflatability of national borders. The butterfly effect of world events spun throughout the novel dissolves boundaries, both temporal and spatial ones, at the same time as it erects new ones. At the temporal level first, by suggesting that the lack of resolution of the conflicts attendant on decolonization is at the heart of contemporary global terrorism, but also at a spatial level, suggesting that the lack of concern of the First World is what throws the Third World into uncertainty and communal radicalism. A fellow worshipper comments on this lack of responsabilisation of the West in relation to tensions occurring in the East, as Bibi-ji and Pa-ji slowly understand the dangerous situation they find themselves in in the Golden Temple: "'Didn't you know?' Rani was suddenly angry. 'How could you *not* know? 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). Soon the Indian community in Vancouver turns into "obsessed stargazers" (65), miming tensions growing in the homeland, only more powerfully so, since the media

4. "Line of Control" refers to the 740 kilometre-long cease-fire border, recognized by the UN. Since 1971, this military line has divided the former princely state of Kashmir into two parts, one controlled by India, the other by Pakistan. Though not legally recognized as an international border, it is nevertheless respected by military forces commissioned by international mandate. It constitutes a source of major political discord and insecurity between Indian and Pakistani governments.

leads them to observe their distant homes “as if through a telescope, every small wound or scar or flare back there exaggerated, exciting their imaginations and their emotions, bringing tears to their eyes” (51). Slowly the in-betweenness of events takes a turn for the worse, and a monstrous side of the narrative surfaces.

The Liminal Monster

The interconnectedness of events, I believe, suggests a form of global terrorism which could stem from the West and from unresolved post-imperial history. The loss of a loved one, experienced in various degrees by every single character in the novel, plants in them the seed of fanatic revenge, resulting in the breeding of a young generation which seeks escape in acts of terror. The initial carnival atmosphere floating about the first half of the novel turns into an ugly distortion resulting in the most graphic depictions of torture and death. The lavender-scented soap which Bibi-ji initially relishes becomes associated with the rape and death of her sister, and follows her all through her life before driving her mad with sorrow (“Soap was the centre of most of the problems of life, as far as she was concerned. Lavender soap in particular.” 196). According to Bhabha, interconnectedness (or “occult instability,” a phrase coined initially by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, 183) is at the heart of powerful cultural change, which could be called a “post-postcolonial” time in history, when the celebration of migrant hybridity is cancelled out and replaced by the looming irresolution of conflicted and conflicting liminality. The key to the novel, in my opinion, is precisely located in the friction created by the Bakhtinian doubling of the narrative voice, the breaking down of a national language into multiple layers of meaning, whether it be in the comical vs. tragic register, the local vs. global dimension, or the tension between cultural diversity and difference. In Pnina Werbner’s words, liminality in this novel is fundamentally political and it resides in the “moment or place of untranslatability,” where “a thing becomes its alterity” (136).

The second half of the novel explores the motif of monstrosity in terms of hybridity gone wrong. The hybridity of history, which is the bringing together of truth and fiction, as suggested by Pa-ji, theoretically serves the purpose of armouring the individual against one’s own uncertainty about one’s place in the world,⁵ and as such, it can be distorted to fit one’s needs. But in reality, history fails in that attempt to establish a sense of belonging, since it becomes a monster in its own right which “swallows you whole” (266). Let us consider the following extract, in which Jasbeer, the sweet young boy turned extremist, reaches out to Preethi, the daughter Leela has lost in the terrorist attack:

Do you remember how we used to go from house to house on Halloween saying Trick or Treat and expecting nothing more terrifying than a handful of candy? We were dressed as monsters but we were only children. Now I am no longer a child but in the last few years I had become a monster. I didn’t bother to hide myself behind a disguise. I went around the villages of Punjab, banging on doors, holding out a cloth bag. The door would open and a frightened face would peer out. I didn’t need to say anything. They knew I was there to make money. Trick or Treat, I wanted to say, Trick or Treat. Not that the person who opened the door had a choice. I expected a gift of money or gold. Both would be

5. “In the blank slate of a foreign country, Pa-ji came to understand, you could scribble the truth any way you wanted. [...] Armouring by his fictions against the suspicious glances of the Europeans in the city and the fear that the look in their eyes would turn to violence, against the cold that soaked into his bones, against exhaustion and loneliness in a strange land, young Pa-ji had worked hard and saved his earnings.” (203-4)

used to buy us food and more guns and grenades. This was how we found the means to fight for a free country. After a while I didn't know what that meant anymore, really. Free country. (397)

Two levels of discourse overlap in this extract: the "innocent" Canadian culture of Jasbeer's childhood, and the monstrous terrorist acts of his adulthood which have plunged him into uncertainty and violence. But the coexistence of these two levels has the effect of altering each of the two cultures, essentially suggesting the strangeness for young men from such different horizons of being invested with such power. Thus the violence is all the more enhanced by the apparent sweetness of the act of trick-or-treating once worlds collide. The blending of fiction and fact, comedy and tragedy, fanatic idealism and history, and the utter horror into which the end of the novel is thrown suggests that this liminal state of being is the result of modernity's disruption of history. The double voice captured in Jasbeer's single utterance denotes the fragile liminality which, to my mind, constitutes the untranslatable "politics of polarity" from which emerge "the others of our selves," in Bhabha's words (157). Jasbeer becomes the ritualized, monstrous clown who tears down the barriers between Third- and First-World, safety and danger, thus plunging the modern world into a liquid age of uncertainty which, in Zygmunt Bauman's words, comes down to social forms melting faster than the time it takes to cast them (*Liquid Times* 1).

Jennifer RANDALL

University Paris 8 – Vincennes Saint-Denis

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