

A tale of love and terror

By KATE TAYLOR

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Anita Rau Badami's new novel, like its author, struggles to embrace both India and Canada, writes KATE TAYLOR

Writer Anita Rau Badami was honeymooning in New Delhi when Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984, and amid the ensuing tumult she saw the corpse of a man who had been burned alive by the Hindu thugs who took revenge on any Sikh they could find. The following year, Badami's neighbour from her home in Chennai in southern India died in the terrorist bombing of Air India Flight 182, and his disconsolate widow committed suicide.

"Curiously, both events were made part of my consciousness in a very particular way," Badami said in an interview on the eve of the publication of her third novel, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

The impact of sectarian violence on completely innocent lives was immediately imprinted on a young and literary mind, but it has taken 22 years and five drafts for the novelist, now 45, to wrestle the subject to the ground in fiction. *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* follows the fates of three women from two immigrant families—one Sikh, the other Hindu—that lose members to the violence that marked the partition of Hindu India from Muslim Pakistan in 1947, to the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 and to the Sikh terrorist bombing of the Air India flight that originated in Vancouver in 1985.

From a poor Sikh family in the Punjab, the big, ebullient and greedy Bibi-ji embraces a new world and its new wealth, building up a thriving Indian restaurant on Vancouver's Main Street while back in India her sister is killed during Partition. Nimmo, Bibi-ji's long-lost niece, stays in India but eventually sends her son Jasbeer to Vancouver where, despite Bibi-ji's best efforts, he becomes entangled in Sikh extremism.

Half-Indian, half-German, the anxious Leela, who has escaped her mixed-race background through marrying into a good family of Hindu Brahmins in Bangalore, comes to Vancouver very grudgingly but finds herself surprisingly at home in this new place.

Like Badami herself, Leela knows what it is to be a "half-and-half" person, which is how her grandmother described the mythic character of the king Trishanku who, wanting to take his body with him to heaven, winds up hanging forever in the void between two worlds.

"It's a strange place to be in. As a fiction writer it's a very productive place," Badami said. "There are many stories because of the unease of that in-between space."

Badami immigrated to Calgary in 1991 with her husband, an urban planner, and enrolled in a creative-writing program at the University of Calgary. Famously, it was when her instructor encouraged her to submit her MA thesis project to a publisher that she was instantly launched as a novelist: *Tamarind Mem*, a novel about the relationship between an immigrant daughter in Calgary and a mother back in India, became a highly praised bestseller when it was published in 1996. In 2000, she followed it with *The Hero's Walk*, which was a regional winner for the Commonwealth Prize and long-listed for both the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Orange Prize. Both novels included characters who were living in Canada, but with *Nightbird*, Badami has taken her move into a Canadian literary realm one step further as she turns to a particularly raw episode in the country's recent past.

"I was nervous about it; it's not even history, it's still going on," she said, referring to the upcoming inquiry into the Air India case, in which two British Columbian Sikhs were acquitted last year. "Relatives of people who died in the Air India disaster still don't feel they have justice. People whose families died in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination have that same feeling."

The ongoing political events surrounding both the Air India case and terrorism in general are part of the reason it took her five drafts to write the book. What began as a love story between a Hindu girl and Sikh boy in Vancouver and dealt with the Air India disaster at length had to be rewritten when the case finally came to trial in 2003.

"Because it hadn't come to trial in 15 years, I just assumed it would never come to trial," she said. "And then, lo and behold, I had to start another book."

She could no longer speculate that her hero was involved in the bombing since readers now knew about the accused, so she changed her focus to deal with the lovers' mothers. After Sept. 11, she was also concerned that the novel not seem opportunistic in its treatment of terrorism. Instead it has become, coincidentally, highly topical because the character of Jasbeer, the young Vancouverite embroiled in a foreign political battle, plays to current concern over so-called homegrown terrorists in the United Kingdom and Canada.

"I wrote him in the first person to begin with," Badami said. "I wrote all the characters in the first person to figure out their thoughts, what they felt like inside their skins."

That technique also lengthened the writing process, as did all the work Badami did researching everything from daily life on Main Street in the 1950s to Sikh religious practice. She also read interviews with young terrorists.

"I was fascinated by these characters: How did they perceive themselves? . . . Some were drawn into violence because they were poor and unemployed and it gave them a sense of belonging to something that seemed more powerful," Badami said. "It was only when they were obliged to commit acts of violence that they questioned it, and by then it was too late . . . Then I asked what it would feel like to be the mother or the lover of someone [like that]. It's a kind of loss, you are losing that person."

The novel expresses no sympathy for terrorism and little sympathy for Sikh nationalism, but Badami, whose family is Hindu, has no particular qualms about its reception. She points out that Hindu attacks against Sikhs are also presented in the novel: "It's not sympathetic to violence . . . These women could be of any background. What do they have to do with this quarrel between the [Indian] government and these extremists in the Punjab?"

Meanwhile, Badami is already at work on her next novel, which will be set entirely in Canada, though she isn't sure where. Perhaps it will be in Quebec—the writer moved from Vancouver to Montreal five years ago when her husband took a job teaching at McGill University. But that would mean addressing the language issue, which she feels she still isn't Canadian enough to tackle. Or perhaps it will be set in some small town in the interior of B.C., which, unlike Vancouver, would be well endowed with the particularly Canadian commodity of snow.

"The books I am writing are part of the process of leaving one world behind and entering another," she said.