

Passages from India

How a frightening brush with anarchy shaped Anita Rau Badami's powerful new novel on home-grown terrorism

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Anita Rau Badami will never forget seeing a man burned alive, and then tossed from a culvert into a dry river bed. It was 1984. Badami and her new husband, Madhav, were on a bus travelling to Delhi from Dehradun, a hill resort in northern India. It was the last day of their honeymoon. Indira Gandhi, prime minister at the time, had just been assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards and the country had erupted in sectarian violence unseen since the bloody days of Partition.



CREDIT: Richard Arless Jr, for the Citizen's Weekly

It took author Anita Rau Badami many years to confront the horrors she saw as a young bride in the streets of Delhi in 1984, and to write about it in her new novel.

A Hindu by birth, Badami cannot forget her bus driver that day pleading with Sikh passengers to leave and go into hiding because their safety could not be guaranteed. Badami can not forget the policemen standing idly by while Hindu mobs slaughtered Sikhs -- a common method was to yank a tire over a person's head and shoulders, locking arms to torso, then dousing the victim in kerosene and setting him or her ablaze.

On the brighter side, Badami can also remember, with deep gratitude, the elderly Sikh couple who risked their own lives to transport the honeymooning couple through lawless streets from the Delhi bus terminal to the safety of an aunt's home.

At the time of these horrific events, Badami was a freelance journalist living in Madras. She was soon to be an internationally celebrated novelist (*Tamarind Mem* and *The Hero's Walk*) based in Canada. Badami knows how to earn her living with clever words. But she had no words to describe those days in India.

"I never wrote about this," Badami says over lunch in a downtown chi-chi restaurant. "I just couldn't bring myself to confront it."

But she did eventually confront it in Vancouver, where she and her husband moved in 1995 after four years in Calgary. They now live in Montreal, where Badami's husband, an engineer and urban planner, teaches at McGill University.

Upon arriving on the West Coast a decade ago, Badami found the Indo-Canadian community was still bitterly divided over the Indian army's 1984 invasion and massacre of thousands at Sikhs' holiest shrine, the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the subsequent revenge assassination of Gandhi and the terrorist bombing of an Air India jet June 23, 1985 en route to India from Toronto.

All 329 people aboard were killed. Most were Canadians. One of the passengers was an Indian man, a neighbour of Badami's in Madras. She knew the man only slightly. Nevertheless, his death brought the tragedy home to her.

That bombing was the globe's worst-ever act of aviation terrorism. It was Canada's 9/11. Until now, it is a tragedy novelists have largely left untouched, its greater truths left unexplored.

Badami has changed all that with her upcoming, powerful novel, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* The book is a fictional treatment of the events in both India and Canada that led to the bombing. The novel shows how normally apolitical Sikh-Canadians could become radicalized, sympathize with terrorists and even take vengeful action themselves.

The deeper, sad truth about the book is that it is not just a story about Sikhs in Canada and India, but about all of us who feel forced to react when we see relatives "back home" in South Asia, the Middle East, Ireland, the Balkans, or anywhere suffering for being part of a particular religious or ethnic group. It's a book, in essence, about home-grown terrorism wherever it is found.

Badami started the novel before the 9/11 terrorists attacks on the United States in 2001, before the term "home-grown terrorism" became such a common catch-phrase. But because of events of the past five years, the publication of Badami's novel this week by Alfred A. Knopf Canada has become more timely than ever.

Upon reading this book, it is difficult to avoid asking yourself how you would react to attacks on innocent relatives and on the religion that just may define you. Would you stew in silence? Would you seek revenge? Would you take up arms?

These are questions Badami still asks herself. The answers elude her. It's a startling admission from a woman who seems so gentle, poised and gracious and interrupts her conversation frequently with a little-girl laugh.

"I don't know how I would react if somebody I loved dearly was murdered or killed," Badami says. "I could be rational and say, 'OK, this has happened; I'm not going to go and blow up anybody in the world in response.'" But she also wonders whether she might follow the vengeful path of so many others and "kill innocent people."

Such choices confront the characters in *Nightbird*. Some of them, young men in Canada and India, become terrorists. And then there are those like Bibi-ji, the matronly Sikh businesswoman in Vancouver who eschewed Sikh politics most of her life.

That changes when, while on a pilgrimage, she witnesses the Golden Temple massacre and, following Gandhi's assassination, some of her dearest relatives are killed in mob violence.

Bibi-ji is, by the way, the daughter of a man who attempted unsuccessfully to emigrate to Canada from India in 1914. The fictional man was a passenger on the very real ship, *Komagata Maru*, a Japanese vessel chartered by an affluent businessman, Gurdit Singh, to bring Indian immigrants to Canada. The

passengers included 376 Indians, 340 of them Punjabi Sikhs. Authorities in Vancouver refused the boat permission to dock. Amid great hardship, the boat was forced to recross the Pacific.

The Komagata Maru was the first big collision between Sikhs and Canadian authorities. The bombing of Air India was the latest. The ship's voyage and the plane trip serve as bookends to Badami's story.

The plot of *Nightbird* concentrates on the lives of three Indian women who are remarkable only because of the tragedies they suffer during India's religious strife. In the centre of it all is the aforementioned Bibi-ji. We first meet her as a poor, beautiful teenager who steals her very plain sister's fiance and moves with him to Canada. There, they prosper but, to their immense sadness, have no children, until many decades later when Bibi-ji's niece, Nimmo, allows the Canadian couple to take one of her sons from India to be raised in Vancouver. It's a decision Nimmo comes to regret. The third woman is Leela, a Hindu who emigrates to Vancouver and is befriended by Bibi-ji but is ultimately betrayed by her.

Badami started contemplating *Nightbird* a decade ago. (The title refers to an omen of bad luck.) The author initially wanted to write a story about a person who knows a relative is about to commit a terrorist act and then must decide whether to alert the police. That story was being written before the lengthy trial of two men charged in the Air India bombing, millionaire Sikh businessman Ripudaman Singh Malik and sawmill worker Ajaib Singh Bagri. Both were acquitted in March last year. Their trial did not bring closure to the case. But it did put on the public record many details about the backstory to the bombing. Badami was no longer free to invent those details and was forced to rewrite her novel entirely.

Much of *Nightbird* is presented in a detached, journalistic way. Badami did not want to take sides in the Sikh-Hindu battles in Canada and India: "My moral point of view is that violence, in the end, hurts everybody."

It's a point of view that began to take shape in a young bride's head 22 years ago on the road to Delhi. It was reinforced a year later when a neighbour was killed on Air India. And reinforced yet again in the 1990s when encountering a divided Indo-Canadian community in Vancouver.

It's a moral point of view Badami wants to disseminate. But it's a point of view she knows that, once adopted, can be radically changed.

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