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Rustling Shadows: Plants as Markers of Historical Violence and Diasporic Identity in Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* is a novel of negotiation. Explored in the context of simmering animosities—socio-economic, cultural, religious, racial—and recurring communal violence, Badami's three female protagonists spend their lifetimes negotiating their personal, public, and often conflicting identities, as well as the legacies and traumatic memories of dislocation, violence, and loss among transnational communities in the decades following India's 1947 Partition. This paper explores the role of plants in *Nightbird* as indicators of violence and evocations of diasporic identity. If Badami's novel grapples, as Shilpa D. Bhat argues, with "the question of the homeland/hostland binary and historical realities" manifest in the experience of twentieth-century diasporic Indian communities in Canada (55), it follows that formulations of home and belonging play an integral role in exploring the distinctions and gaps between these physical, psychological, and temporal spaces. The forging of identities resilient to the precarity of diasporic liminality and intergenerational trauma is a challenge shared by the novel's female protagonists, and plants play a key

role in contextualizing through metaphor home in its various iterations as a reflection of this process.

Like the protagonists and their memories, plants are living, evolving beings that through their own forms of mobility both erect and dismantle boundaries; and, as commodities, companions, and cultural symbols, they are acted upon by humans in ways that reflect back to us the challenges of migration and marginality. It is fitting, then, that Badami—herself an avid gardener and plant lover—has chosen through *Nightbird* to employ plants as a medium by which contests of place, home, and memory are explored.[1] In channelling my analysis of *Nightbird* through a deep attention to the plants that dot its landscapes, I draw upon the precedents being set by the burgeoning field of critical plant studies. As Woodward and Lemmer argue in their introduction to the 2019 *Critical Plant Studies* issue of the *Journal of Literary Studies*, "plants play a crucial role in the experience of being human" (24).[2] In *Nightbird*, plants reflect and actively support ongoing human negotiations of memory, power, and belonging as they manifest across transnational and temporal contexts, not only because of the prominent role certain plants play in the history of colonial and postcolonial India, but also because plants are deeply integrated in human processes of placemaking and identity construction. In the novel, Badami turns recurringly to plants to articulate, through symbolization and sensorial evocation, inarticulable experiences of dislocation, violence, and (non)belonging, and the often fragmented and repressed memories those experiences create. Tarun K. Saint, in his book on fictive testimony in Partition literature, argues that "literature as a mode of surrogate testimony, folding back into historical memory after such a detour through the imagination" (20), employs a form of truth-telling whose emphasis on symbolization and whose oblique renderings of traumatic memory attempt a counter-memory to official narratives, speaking on behalf of those who have experienced violence but who cannot, for a multiplicity of reasons, bear witness to or recount their own stories (23). In offering a close reading of plants in Badami's *Nightbird*, this paper contributes to ongoing scholarship on Partition and diasporic literature whose representational strategies negotiate the challenges of intergenerational memory and trauma that continue to haunt South Asian communities across the globe.

Can You Hear the Nightbird Call? follows the stories of three women whose lives are marked and connected by shared intergenerational and community traumas inflicted by Partition and subsequent iterations of socio-political upheaval and violence within and beyond the borders of India. Bibi-ji, born Sharanjeet Kaur in a small Punjab village, leaves her homeland for Vancouver, Canada, as a young woman to fulfill her father's unrequited desire to immigrate to the Pacific Northwest. She loses touch with her remaining family in the wake of Partition, leaving her bereft and burdened by guilt for having left. Nimmo, Bibi-ji's long-lost niece, is a mother in New Delhi, haunted by the fragmented memories of Partition violence (rape, murder, dislocation) in which the rest of her family was lost. Her happenstance reunion with Bibi-ji leads to the forging of a challenging relationship built on tenuous family connections and disparate cultural and socio-economic experiences. Leela Bhat, daughter of a German mother and Brahmin father, is a South Indian biracial woman who, upon immigration to Vancouver, finds herself suddenly without the good reputation of her husband's family that has always preceded her, and upon which she has so carefully built her sense of belonging. Leela is befriended immediately by Bibi-ji, her landlord, but their relationship becomes increasingly strained as the consequences of political violence in India reverberate within the diasporic community.

Bookended by the turning away of the *Komagata Maru* on the West Coast of Canada in 1914 and the Air India bombing in 1985, the novel navigates the transnational history of post-Partition Punjab through the protagonists' direct and indirect connections to the major events that mark this history—Partition, the Indian Emergency, the Khalistan movement, the attack on the Golden Temple, the assassination of Indira Gandhi, and the subsequent anti-Sikh pogroms—and, just as importantly, to the oppressive colonial history that preceded and informed it. Focusing first on the sugar cane fields surrounding Sharanjeet's childhood village, on the imported lavender soap coveted by Sharanjeet, and on Mrs. Hardy's Amritsar English garden, I argue that plants evoke past, present, and future communal and familial traumas, reflecting the entangled histories of colonization by a foreign power and the mass violence of independence as these resonate through Bibi-ji's life. I then argue that the roses in Bibi-ji's Vancouver garden are the evocation of a carefully constructed but always precarious diasporic domestic identity,

while the mango trees of Leela Bhat's past and imagined future are both a symbol of and an impediment to notions of belonging.

The opening pages of the novel, which introduce the young Sharanjeet Kaur, immediately provide the reader with a succinct description of pre-Partition West Punjab, a "landscape of villages" scattered across fertile fields of sugar cane, the inhabitants alike "in their annual yearning for the monsoon rains and a bountiful harvest" (Badami 3). In these opening pages, Badami already hints at a fraught history of violence, the "fertile fields" having made the region highly prosperous and, in conjunction with its strategic geographical position, highly desirable to foreign invaders since the seventh century (Badami, "Historical Note" 407). Specifically, the fields of sugar cane can be read as an allusion to more recent foreign intervention. Although sugar cane cultivation has a long history in India, British colonial rule forced greater emphasis on the production and export of cash crops (such as cotton, tobacco, indigo, and sugar cane) through trade regulation and oppressive tax policies. These policies, along with land enclosure, created divisions among the peasant class, leaving many with greater wealth but many more with crippling debt (Attwood 9). A system of debt peonage arose from the monetization of agricultural production achieved through the colonial-era requirement that peasants pay their land revenue in cash, a move that encouraged the commercial sale of crops but also forced a reliance on collateral advance loans (Fox 465). The burden of the colonial tax system and the entrenchment of predatory moneylenders within the peasant economy are clearly evoked in these early pages of the novel as Sharanjeet's father seeks freedom from "the endless cycle of uncertain monsoons, the certain arrival of the tax collector with his pursed lips and implacable eyes, and the inevitable journey to the moneylender who waited like a vulture to lay his hands on their meagre land" (Badami 15). His desire to escape the oppression of lifelong debt propels Harjot Singh to make his failed journey to Canada, an experience that leaves "an indelible mark on [Sharanjeet's] psyche," manifesting in "an intense longing for the land that had refused her father entry" (Chakraborty 123) and setting her on a path toward diasporic subjecthood.

In Sharanjeet's childhood village, sugar cane represents not only the region's agricultural economy and her own rural upbringing, but also the

socio-political consequences of colonial rule. Sharanjeet's Sikh household, we learn, is "[o]ne of a small cluster of Sikh and Hindu houses . . . separated from the Muslim homes by fields of swaying sugar cane" (Badami 3). Like the colonial censuses that drew strictly demarcated religious lines across communities sharing regionally specific histories (Khan 20), sugar cane, the beloved British cash crop, portentously divides the Muslim households from their Sikh and Hindu counterparts in a topographical rendering of growing ethno-religious divisions. Ominous, too, is the foreshadowing function of the fields the night that Sharanjeet's father disappears—an event that propels Sharanjeet toward her self-purported destiny of immigrating to Canada. Badami's description of wind hissing through the fields so that the sugar cane "shook its long fingers at the dark sky" (12) is, in itself, an unsettling image made worse by the near-silence that accompanies his departure, a single bird call sung in warning the only evidence of something amiss. But more unnerving still is the echo of this scene in the fragmented recollections, discussed in more detail later, of Sharanjeet's niece Nimmo's unimaginable childhood trauma: "A child runs through the rustling shadow of tall sugar cane, its syrupy smell mingling with the pungent odour of smoke from burning roof thatch" (152) in the aftermath of an ethno-religious slaughter during Partition. Sugar cane thus functions geographically and socio-economically to contextualize Sharanjeet's upbringing, but also as an interlocutor between past, present, and future instances of colonial and communal violence. A marker of British colonial enterprise and of the landscape of Sharanjeet's father's failure as a rejected colonial subject, the sugar cane also presages the extreme violence arising from Indian independence and the country's subsequent partition into India and Pakistan as experienced through the suppressed memories of Sharanjeet's niece.

Just as sugar cane positions her family within a specific rural cash crop economy in West Punjab, so Sharanjeet's childhood longings reaffirm their relative poverty. Sharanjeet's small world revolves around the "tumultuous envy" she feels for her best friend Jeeti, resident of the large brick-and-mortar house down the road from Sharanjeet's family's mud and thatch home (4). The object of Sharanjeet's deepest affectionate envy, however, is "Jeeti's supply of lavender soap, sent by Sher Singh, her father, all the way from Canada" (4). In these early pages, lavender soap is, for Sharanjeet, a marker of her family's

poverty by virtue of its very inaccessibility, a poignant contrast to the stench of cow dung that seems to permeate her existence (6). Lavender is equally a symbol of the life of privilege to which Sharanjeet early aspires. Comingled in the powerful scent of the bar are the historical underpinnings of this socio-economic disparity between friends, for Jeeti's family's wealth is modelled through her father Sher Singh's status as a diasporic Indian subject living in Canada, his emigration portrayed as an investment that has paid dividends to his family back home in the form of a large house, expensive food, and parcels of "strange and wonderful things like soap and chocolate" (14). His success stands in stark contrast to the failed attempt by Sharanjeet's father to replicate Sher Singh's success by finding his own way to Canada. Propelled by what Sharanjeet's mother Gurpreet terms "'the troublesome question Why Not'" (18), Harjot Singh uses the family's meagre assets to fund his ill-fated journey, arriving on the western shore of Canada in the *Komagata Maru* only to be turned away "as if he were a pariah dog" (10).[3] Having returned confused and embittered, Harjot Singh spends the remainder of his life until his disappearance housebound and chronically sleepy from psychological exhaustion. Jeeti's lavender soap, then, is more than mere childhood idolatry. As an exotic luxury import, the soap for Sharanjeet is the material expression of an elusive but attainable dream of privileged diasporic subjecthood: "Canada, with its lavender soap and chocolate," evolves from a source of childhood envy to Sharanjeet's fated destination (27). When Sharanjeet reaches Vancouver and becomes Bibi-ji, she scents her diasporic subjecthood with lavender, scattering dried flowers throughout her drawers and in her shoes (54), fulfilling her lifelong dream in its most basic material sense.

Yet, the lavender soap that in the early pages of the book drives Sharanjeet to fulfill her inherited dream of immigrating to Canada and marks the construction of her new diasporic domestic identity later becomes tainted with the unshakeable odours of grief, trauma, and violence. Following Partition and the disappearance of her sister, Kanwar, and her family, Sharanjeet-turned-Bibi-ji rejects the scent that in Vancouver had "preceded her arrival and remained like a memory after her departure" (54), clearing away the evidence of her selfish aspirations though, despite her efforts, "the smell of the herb clung to her like guilt" (54). Like the rustling sugar cane

that is witness to the multi-generational trauma of Sharanjeet's family, lavender soap takes on the function of a violent echo, an evocation of past, present, and future traumas, so that what was once a scent representing privileged cleanliness metamorphoses into an unshakeable smell of horror. For Bibi-ji, lavender becomes the scent of her family's silence—ominous and sickening, and inextricably tangled in her callous teenage decision to rob her sister of her purported suitor in a desperate bid to get to Canada and make her life "complete" (35).

Later in the novel, a second echo reverberates across the pages. Bibi-ji's niece, Nimmo, bereft of coherent memories of early childhood and the loss of her family in the violence of Partition, is left only with confused, fragmentary images imbued with the sweet fragrance of "pale violet-coloured soap that her aunt had sent from somewhere far away" (156). The scent of lavender conjures flashes of her mother washing herself in the dark after hiding Nimmo in a grain bin for hours, and of "a pair of lavender-fragrant feet suspended above the floor" (161). Through the disjointed imagery of Nimmo's recall, we are made to understand that her childhood village was the target of anti-Sikh communal violence during Partition, her mother bearing the brunt of a horrific assault after hiding her daughter away. Yet these memories, elusive like the scent that conjures them, leave both Nimmo and the reader grasping at lost details.

Traces of the herbal fragrance drift across the last pages of the novel, too, as Nimmo reminds herself in the throes of her newest grief that this scent is all that remains of her "foolish" mother (401). The reminder is a conscious attempt to reject this grief, a drawing of distinctions between her mother and herself as a shield against the reality of losing her family yet again. In Nimmo's grief-addled mind, her mother was naively unprepared to meet the threat of violence, whereas Nimmo herself has been "a careful woman, a fearful one, who is prepared for trouble" (401). But the communalist violence of Nimmo's childhood—fated by the scars of violent and outrageous death to rest in delicate, angry dormancy until new events prompt its re-emergence—reverberates and rematerializes throughout her life, culminating in the deaths of her husband and two of her children during the anti-Sikh pogrom that followed the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Nimmo is left alone in the domestic space of the house, the blind familiarity of her kitchen where the

smells of nightly cooking for an absent family compete with the lingering scent of purple soap for control over her brittle psyche. In witnessing Nimmo's rejection of this memory, this scent, we the readers are made all too aware of the cyclical nature of generational trauma.

The ability of plants to migrate across temporal boundaries through sense-driven embodied memory speaks to the cycle of (inter)generational trauma most keenly on display in the fraught relationship between Bibi-ji and Nimmo. In a critical analysis of women writers whose works explore diasporic subjecthood, Sneja Gunew writes that Badami anchors her meditations "in the sensorium—the manner in which particular ways of being are embodied—scripted in and on bodies" (34). Gunew argues that in *Nightbird*, this embodiment takes the form of "traditional nostalgias associated with cuisine or, more unexpectedly, the barely noticeable smell of lavender soap that poignantly binds together an aunt and her lost (and subsequently recovered) niece" (34-35). The binding together of these characters in the novel is essential to the propulsion of the narrative, affirming for the reader the familial connection between Bibi-ji and Nimmo that for them remains hidden in the murky, Partition-muddied waters of the past. Yet Gunew's use of the word "nostalgia" is, I think, misplaced, conjuring happy associations where none remain. The scent of lavender is from the very first tainted by oppressive historical associations that only gain strength as the luxury product becomes witness and unwitting accomplice to increasing violence. Nimmo's memory of lavender soap confirms her blood tie to Bibi-ji, yes, but their shared familiarity with the scent—never spoken of between them—is not to be celebrated, nor is it a wistful evocation of a home and time left behind; rather, it is a thread of violence that runs from the *Komagata Maru* through Sharanjeet's betrayal of her sister in order to reach Canada, the deaths of Nimmo's parents and sibling in Partition, and, later, the deaths of her husband and children in the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom. Embodied memory, here, is a burden of trauma whose aromatic echoes Bibi-ji and Nimmo both try to avoid. For the reader, lavender—like sugar cane—offers an alternative sharing of individual and collective memory that leaves room for the gaps and silences that necessarily accompany women's histories of Partition. As Urvashi Butalia explains, there remains a collective historical silence surrounding the violence and trauma experienced by women during

Partition, both because such trauma is difficult on an individual emotional level to acknowledge and discuss, and because the type of violence experienced by these women is thought by families and communities to be unacceptable or shameful (63). For Nimmo, the dark memories of Partition are "wicked spirits" (Badami 152) whose power and unpredictability leave her with a compulsion to suppress the "monstrous, silent" (158) fear that accompanies them. She cannot vocalize her past. The novel's acknowledgement and negotiation through symbolization of Nimmo's attempted foreclosure of memory is in keeping with a tradition of post-1980 Partition literature in which "we find oblique gestures towards loss and trauma, circling around a silence at the core" (Saint 14). The power of Badami's narrative, then, lies in the indirectness of its telling, which offers embodied yet unarticulated acknowledgement of these traumas through the protagonists' interactions with plants.

Other plants play an equally important role in locating Sharanjeet's construction of identity within the context of colonial oppression and postcolonial political upheaval. In transitioning from Sharanjeet Kaur of the village of Pandaur to Bibi-ji, wife of Kushwant (Pa-ji) Singh, Bibi-ji relocates to Amritsar to undergo the education necessary to live up to her husband's expectations of a modern but culturally faithful Sikh wife. A key part of this education are English lessons with a British colonial transplant, Mrs. Hardy, who teaches Sharanjeet to speak and act like a proper Englishwoman. The lessons take place in Mrs. Hardy's drawing room by a window overlooking "an English garden of roses, delphinium, phlox and lilies that drooped and died in the scorching sun of Amritsar" (Badami 34). Badami's choice of garden plants is consciously significant. Mrs. Hardy's futile attempt at cultivating English horticultural favourites is an easy allusion to the fading of British colonial rule, their slow death under the sun speaking to the increasing disillusionment of colonial subjects chafing under foreign governance. That these plants are purely ornamental can be read, too, as an implicit critique of a colonial government whose power was in many ways nominal, relying heavily on the cheap costs of a bureaucracy and military made up of colonized subjects to maintain control over the vast geography of the subcontinent (Fox 466). The uncomfortably physical image of the plants' demise under the hot sun symbolizes the end of British dominance, a

transition of power that brings in its wake waves of unimaginable violence. "Partition," Iyer writes, "is part of a continuum of disruption and dislocation caused by the British Empire and decolonization" (54). In my reading, these doomed plants not only symbolize the imposition of a foreign power. They also serve as premonitory markers of mass violence borne of the consequences of a hastily and carelessly organized British departure that leaves the earth of the subcontinent literally and figuratively charred.

Carefully juxtaposed with Sharanjeet's window view of the garden is her view on the opposite side of the room of the Golden Temple, Harmandir Sahib, the holiest site in Sikhism, where Sharanjeet undergoes religious instruction on the weekends. The contrast of the English garden with the Golden Temple, as well as Sharanjeet's positioning in between them, foreshadows her transformation into a new Canadian Sikh wife and the in-between state she inhabits as a diasporic subject, "caught between a homeland and a hostland" (Iyer 57). As readers we are quickly made aware that this spatialized binary is an overt representation of the two aspects of education undertaken by Sharanjeet in order that she "become the two-edged sword that her husband wanted her to be" (Badami 34). She is expected to learn enough of the English language and culture to successfully navigate the Canadian cultural landscape while also maintaining a strong connection to her own Sikh religion and culture so that she may display behaviours expected of a good Sikh wife. This gendered, hybrid education is a turning point in the narrative of Sharanjeet's life, defining future encounters with others in India and Canada and modelling a process of transcultural identity construction demanded of a good diasporic subject.

The carefully curated setting for Sharanjeet's tutoring by Mrs. Hardy is also a spatiotemporal expression of a historical continuum of violence whose effects ripple across Sharanjeet-Bibi-ji's life. The plants, "drooped and [dying]" (34) from intense desiccation, conjure palpable visions of the impending violence of Partition, while their positioning opposite the Golden Temple speaks to the violent trajectory of the fight for Sikh political-religious freedom propelled by a long history of ethno-political oppression and communal violence. Sikh loyalty to and subsequent disillusionment with British rule contributed to a longer process of politicization of Sikh identity that strengthened through Partition and evolved over the following decades

in the face of long-standing ethnic suppression by the state (Cheema 67; Jetly 62). The fight for a separate Sikh state would gain its greatest momentum in Punjab in the 1980s under the leadership of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. Bhindranwale is a complex historical figure whose extremist tactics were first encouraged and later used by the Congress-controlled Indian state to justify incalculably violent suppressive action that would ultimately fuel the Sikh nationalist movement (Butt 101-02). His calls for defensive violent action against suppressive state measures and his decision to headquarter in the Golden Temple complex led to the Indian government's attack on this site (Operation Blue Star, directed by Indira Gandhi), a stark violation of a sacred space that resulted in a high civilian death toll and perpetuated a cycle of inter-ethnic violence whose impacts continue to resonate in both India and Indian diasporic communities (Butt 101; Singh 104-05).

The reader experiences this trajectory of violence through the eyes of the female protagonist. As Sharanjeet watches the dying plants through one window and the Golden Temple through the other, she gazes upon events that will shape her life as a diasporic Sikh Indian subject: Partition, in which she loses her sister and sister's family; the Operation Blue Star attack on the Golden Temple, during which Sharanjeet-Bibi-ji's husband Pa-ji is killed; the highly organized 1984 anti-Sikh pogroms in which her niece Nimmo's husband and two youngest children are killed; and the 1985 bombing of an Air India flight, of which her long-time friend Leela Bhat is a victim. Negotiation of the individual and collective memories of trauma arising from these events both informs and is informed by the liminality of Sharanjeet-Bibi-ji's diasporic identity and sense of belonging. Her geographic separation from homeland and family mostly shields Bibi-ji from the physical experience of living through the violence of Partition and the anti-Sikh genocide, but it also prevents her from reaching loved ones who have fallen victim to that violence, so that this spatial detachment becomes both a burden of guilt in the wake of intense loss and, following Pa-ji's death, a growing anger toward the perpetrators. This anger ultimately redefines Bibi-ji's sense of identity and belonging in her diasporic community as she retreats from old friends and allies, stops running the Delhi Junction Cafe, and closes her home (the whimsically named Taj Mahal) to the inter-ethnic stream of visitors she had always hosted, opening it instead to Sikh separatists. If, as

Chakraborty writes, "how one deals with grief and which direction one takes are determined by the subject's relation to a broader history of loss and suffering" (126), the counterposing of the English colonial garden and Sikh Golden Temple is a contextual reference both to the entangled history of British colonialism in Punjab and the rise of Sikh separatism, and to Sharanjeet's own fraught position within that history as it develops through the twentieth century.

The spatial in-betweenness experienced by Sharanjeet in her tutelage is a blueprint of her later experiences as a diasporic Sikh woman living on the West Coast of Canada, its domesticity equally heralding the gendered spaces in which her hybrid identity is (re)constructed and managed. The starkly gendered space of Mrs. Hardy's drawing room, "festooned in lace" (Badami 34) and overlooking the soft pastels of English floral finery (tended by colonized labourers), is a site of old power, a quiet rendering of colonial patriarchal heteronormative domesticity. The gendered intersubjective relationship between colonizer and colonized is poignantly conveyed in Badami's description of Sharanjeet being taught "ABCD and 1234 like a little girl" under Mrs. Hardy's "sky-blue gaze" (34). While this old power is ultimately rejected by the Indian subcontinent, like the myriad legacies of British colonialism Mrs. Hardy's lessons on Englishness resonate throughout Sharanjeet-Bibi-ji's adult life in Canada, reflected in her graceful interactions with and secret admiration for the white population of her adopted country (41). Significant to my argument here, they are equally reflected in her construction of a domestic space that meets the criteria of an acculturated immigrant Canadian woman and that supports Bibi-ji's self-presentation as a successful community leader.

More than the homes she and Pa-ji have previously shared in Vancouver, the Taj Mahal house and, to a greater degree, its garden are spaces that define Bibi-ji as matriarch of her community. Although Bibi-ji played hostess to newly arrived Indians in her previous homes, and to the diasporic Indian community more broadly in both the grocery store and, later, the Delhi Junction Cafe she owned with her husband, the Taj Mahal property is the culmination of Bibi-ji's social and financial aspirations. It speaks to economic and socio-cultural integration, its purchase by Pa-ji signifying that the couple has been woven into the institutional fabric of Canada. The heterogeneous

mixture of inhabitants in the neighbourhood equally indicates that the couple is part of a larger multi-ethnic landscape (115), their devotion to which is made clear by their efforts to acclimatize and aid new arrivals from India. The palatial appearance of the Taj Mahal—"faux-marble lions adorning the gateposts" (131)—is a marker of status within Bibi-ji's diasporic Indian community, too, an assertion of her female leadership within that community. Sitting in spacious glory, its large rooms play continual host to a stream of visitors anonymous in the hubbub of activity. While the interior of the house is demarcated along gender lines—the men congregate in the living room in front of the TV while the women crowd into the kitchen (132-33)—it is the garden that surrounds the house that most accurately reflects Bibi-ji's carefully constructed yet ultimately fragile diasporic domestic identity.

When new arrival Leela Bhat first visits Bibi-ji at the Taj Mahal, we are told that pine trees line the driveway in twin rows, and a front garden is "full of rose bushes" intermixed with tulips and other unnamed flower species (132). We learn early on that they are Bibi-ji's favourite (64), though the origin of her affection for roses is ambiguous in the novel. The rose, its praises sung by "the bards of all nations and languages" (Shaw 4), figures prominently in the horticultural and national histories of both England and India, and their competing claims to the rose as a symbol of cultural identity are made manifest in the palimpsestic impositions of English garden design and practice on pre-existing Indian garden sites.

Rose cultivation in India is said to stretch back at least five thousand years, although the earliest known written records of its use appear in the Common Era (Viraraghavan). References to the rose abound across a wide range of literary, medico-scientific, and historical Indian texts such that its long-standing socio-cultural and economic importance in the South Asian region cannot be overestimated. Babur, sixteenth-century founder of the Mughal Empire who was known as the "Prince of Gardeners," planted gardens wherever he claimed new territory, "convert[ing] the world," as a later Mughal chronicler would say, "into a rose garden" (qtd. in Welch 60) in a horticultural assertion of political and aesthetic control (Fatima 90; Herbert 210). Babur was known to have a particular fondness for roses and used them in his garden schemes: he is known to have brought into India the Persian quadripartite garden design now associated with classic Mughal gardens and

within which roses figured prominently (Fatima 6, 127; Herbert 207; Viraraghavan). Babur's descendants continued his horticultural legacy, commissioning new gardens as imperial playgrounds and funereal monuments, one of the most famous of which, the Taj Mahal, would later be appropriated into the hands of the British colonial authorities.

Like the Mughal empire, British colonial rule of India, consolidated by the mid-nineteenth century (Roy 35), was reflected topographically in the garden spaces taken over and altered by their administration. The Taj Mahal, already deeply imprinted upon the British Orientalist imaginary, became a particular target of horticultural intervention by Lord Curzon, viceroy of India from 1899-1905, who made it a personal mission to restore the site to its apparently lost former glory (Herbert 198). Purportedly aiming for a strict restoration grounded in historical accuracy, in actual practice "the garden was profoundly altered at the hands of the Curzonites" (203), who overlaid its Mughal design with that of an English park (206). Curzon kept the roses, though original species were replaced with modern hybrid varieties (203); yet in a case of wanton cultural obliviousness, Curzon conceptualized his Taj Mahal rose plantings as emblematic of English cultural superiority by suggesting that their presence "prove[s] the dominion of English ideas" (qtd. in Herbert 218). This brazen act of garden re-narrativization exemplifies a material process at play by which claims to the rose as an emblem of cultural-political power are continually reinscribed on physical and textual landscapes.

Bibi-ji's Vancouver Taj Mahal garden—stately, well kempt, floriferous—is weighted by these competing legacies of horticultural symbolism and place-making/taking, so palpable in the constructed landscapes of her homeland that mark her earlier experiences. As noted earlier, Mrs. Hardy's garden in Amritsar pairs roses with other archetypically "English" garden plants, positioning the rose as a cultural signifier of English gentility at risk from the violent heat of a foreign clime. It is tempting, given the way that Mrs. Hardy's teachings shape Bibi-ji's impressions of Anglo-Canadian culture, to read her front-garden roses as a further aspiration to English genteel taste; and it is worth noting that Bibi-ji's secret admiration for the "goras" includes the curiosity and compulsion to intervene or improve that underlay British imperialist ambitions (Badami 41). However, such a simplistic reading ignores the historical complexities embedded in the cultivated landscapes

of Badami's novel. Instead, I suggest that Bibi-ji's roses mark a more nuanced negotiation of conflicting and interwoven cultural inheritances with which she seeks to construct a diasporic domestic identity.

Like the original site from which it takes its inspiration, Bibi-ji's Taj Mahal rose garden is a material evocation of the temporal, topographic, and palimpsestic configurations of power on the Indian subcontinent that have shaped Indian cultural identities. But it is also an assertion of her own claim to land and cultural identity in the diaspora. Although roses have long played a major role in religious festivals and offerings in India (Pal 19), they do not appear to have a religious function in Bibi-ji's life; unlike Leela, who offers flowers and fruits to the gods in her basement shrine (Badami 237), Bibi-ji does not harvest her flowers for prayer. Instead, the roses appear to have an aesthetic function, their dazzling floral display giving pleasure and pride to their owner and indicating in their universal appeal an appropriate degree of cultural assimilation. In this sense, the rose garden is a domestic space that reflects Bibi-ji's own person: the roses are striking—brightly coloured (pink, like the lipstick Bibi-ji likes to wear [40]), heavily scented, and hybridized—and are highly visible to passers-by and visitors. They are an expression of her success and stand in stark contrast to both Leela Bhat's more modest back garden (an earlier assertion of Bibi-ji's diasporic self) and, more significantly, the cramped "compound" of Bibi-ji's niece, Nimmo, living in financial precarity in New Delhi (144). The identifiers used by Badami are key here, "garden" denoting a space of leisure and beauty in comparison to the "compound" evoking bald utilitarianism. It is Bibi-ji's success in her new homeland—materially expressed in the grandeur of the Taj Mahal and its front garden—that gives her the confidence (or arrogance) to pushily suggest that Nimmo's son Jasbeer return with her to Canada to receive a Western education, effectively robbing Nimmo of her son. The Taj Mahal is also, however, the site where Bibi-ji feels her own failure to acculturate Jasbeer and make him into a model of her own immigrant success (311). As Jasbeer turns increasingly to Sikh separatism to vent his frustration in the face of religious and racial discrimination, Bibi-ji clings to a photo of him taken in her garden wearing a pale blue turban that she has pushed him to swap out for his regular black one (276). The photograph is a falsehood, a reimagining of Jasbeer that strips away his anger and extremist political affiliations by

positioning him within a space of peaceful, beautiful domesticity.[4] In this way, the garden supports Bibi-ji's ongoing curation of the world she inhabits by allowing her to reconcile—at least superficially or temporarily—the irreconcilable differences between the future she had imagined for herself and Jasbeer and the future that has unfolded.

Bibi-ji's spatio-aesthetic negotiation of the contradictions that challenge her strong sense of identity and position within her community is equally apparent in her ongoing battle with the mailman who insists upon transgressing the boundaries of that garden. If we read Bibi-ji's rose garden as a personal and public display of successful diasporic domesticity, the mailman's continued disregard for the integrity of this display suggests a lingering threat to her sense of legitimacy and belonging within Canadian society. The Anglo-Saxon mailman, smug in his ability to cross the private thresholds of citizens on his route, "blithely" ignores Bibi-ji's demands that he walk around her garden to the neighbour's house, coming dangerously close to decapitating her roses as he leaps across the beds (197). While Bibi-ji holds the respect of members within her diasporic Indian community, the mailman's behaviour is a flagrant display of disrespect for her hard-earned position in society, and a reminder that preservation of the bounteous gentility of her property requires constant vigilance and work. At the same time, as the bearer of news—good and bad—from abroad, the mailman is a constant reminder of bad memories and residual guilt, of responsibilities left unheeded, and of sins left unabsolved, so that his transgressive appearance becomes symbolic, too, of the permeability of spatiotemporal boundaries that help to keep such burdens at bay.

While Bibi-ji's hybrid identity is to some degree a result of conscious action—an active seeking-out of a world beyond her village that ultimately demands a fracturing of her identity into conflicting parts—Leela Bhat, a South Indian Hindu woman whose story intertwines with Bibi-ji's own upon immigrating to Vancouver, inherits a "half-and-half" identity thrust upon her at birth (74), her liminality a shadow whose constant presence is, at various moments, either albatross or key to success. Born of a union between her Indian Brahmin father and "a casteless German woman of no known family" (77), Leela's precarious existence in her Bangalore family home, where she "hover[s] on the outskirts of their family's circle of love" (74), instills in her a

profound impulse to feel grounded in place. This impulse takes expression in young Leela's attempt to gain proximity to her grandmother against her cousins' jostling manoeuvres (75) and in the way she interacts with the domesticated landscape surrounding her family home. Leela's wanderings through the garden are tactile, her fingers actively seeking out the materiality of walls and trees by which she derives a feeling of contented belonging (75). Constantly reminded of her placelessness within the family and, as she is made to believe, within society at large, Leela gains fleeting solace from the immovability of man-made boundaries and groomed vegetation.

Leela's search for solace in the constructed landscape is a counterpoint to her mother's relationship to house and garden. Having been worn down over years of pointed ostracization and abuse by her mother-in-law, Rosa Schweers' interactions with her domestic surroundings are antipathetic. The environment of what to her remains a foreign country seems to be an allergen to her body, "everything mak[ing] her ill or nervous—the dust, the heat, the food, the old neem tree outside her window, which she had had trimmed so thoroughly that it listed to one side away from the house, as if in weary disgust" (79). As her name suggests, Rosa's identity, like that of Bibi-ji, is composite, multicultural, and multilingual by way of geographic transplantations: Germany, England, and finally, India. In description, Rosa is equally portrayed as a physical embodiment of her floral namesake. Her youthful beauty is voluptuously expressed in the "charming breasts threatening to spill out of a lacy nightgown," a garment for which, we are told, she has a particular weakness (77), and her later corpulence is fuelled by the forbidden pleasures of meat-based curries (81). In her excessive corporeality, Rosa is marked as immoderately beautiful and overly extravagant in body and effect. Yet, like so many imported hybridized rose varieties, Rosa is weakened by the climatic conditions of the Indian subcontinent, wilting in the face of competition from a mother-in-law whose well-established family histories and traditions root her strongly in place. Relinquishing any spirit of defiance that she had upon her arrival in the household, Rosa cloisters herself in her room and emerges only occasionally to wander into the backyard at dusk when no one is around to disturb her.

Rosa's garden wanderings mirror those of her daughter, her hands similarly grasping at the physical presence of vegetal life. Unlike Leela,

however, who craves proximity to (read: acceptance into) the house and the familiarity of cultivated fruit trees, Rosa's wanderings take her to the fringes of the property, where "the trees ended their shadowy guard" (85), and we are left with the impression of nature uncontained and unkempt. On the day she follows her mother and witnesses her death, Leela is frightened by the isolation of the pond that her mother actively seeks. Her primary emotional response to this liminal space would seem to be justified as she watches her mother drown in the scummy green pond, "this place full of shadows where everything shifted with the movement of the sun" seeming to confirm her worst fears of marginality (85). This episode is key in the development of Leela's carefully constructed identity. It is following her mother's death that Leela actively works to root herself within the household, despite her grandmother's best efforts to sideline her. It is worth noting, however, that this event prompts not a wholesale rejection of in-betweenness but rather its careful management and manipulation. Although Rosa's own ostentatious display of liminality would seem to spell her demise as a "casteless" and family-less undesirable in a strange country, a state of being mirrored by the isolation and overexposure of the pond at the end of the property, Leela understands that the albatross of her birth requires less a full casting-off than a shifting of its weight. The rest of Leela's life is a calculated negotiation of cultural in-betweenness, with her biracial appearance becoming her calling card as much as it remains a source of anxiety, and her university education working in concert with her belief in the gods as a means to marry rationalism and religious superstition (89). Through these negotiations, Leela works toward establishing a stable identity within society, seeking integration in the domestic spaces where her mother, ultimately, sought isolation.

The rootedness to which Leela aspires takes symbolic form in the same trees that dotted her family garden, the strength of their materiality and their easy familiarity providing the same sense of belonging that she experienced, however fleetingly, as a child. After her marriage to Balu, Leela again faces the spectre of death in the cultivated landscape. This time, Leela is in the company of her father-in-law who, approaching his time of passing, sees a figure in the garden outside his study window—an old friend, he tells Leela, coming to claim him at last (100). Leela, too, sees the figure "behind the mango trees, the neem trees and the coconut trees" (101). But in distinct

contrast to the shifting landscape that bore witness alongside Leela to her mother's death, the funereal presence of these well-known trees seems to offer tangible confirmation of belonging. Rather than conveying fear, her father-in-law exhibits a sense of happy acceptance, remarking upon the blessing of dying in one's home at peace and amongst family. Having escaped the marginality of life in her family home and become a member of the Bhat family, Leela decides upon this fate as the true mark of an established place in the world: "[S]he too would like to die in *this* home . . . to be heralded out of this world with the chop-chop-chop of the mango wood from her own backyard and the fragrance of a few drops of precious sandalwood oil" (101, emphasis mine). As Iyer notes, "Leela is determined to erase her foreignness/hybridity by emphatically embracing her husband's family history, family home, and rootedness in the ancestral home" (56). The mango tree—native to the Indian subcontinent and deeply significant to its histories and cultures (Yadav and Singh 1257; Fatima 108)—becomes for Leela a symbol of rightful inclusion, representative of Bangalore, the Bhat family home, and her established place in the Bangalore Hindu community. Iyer suggests that Leela's anxieties over racial hybridity can be attributed to British nineteenth-century colonial discourses on race, her fixation on Indianness indicating an absorption of colonial values perpetuated by her grandmother (57). Even in Leela's emblematizing of her Indian identity through the native mango tree, then, we see the spectre of India's colonial past.

But it is not just the material presence or tangible familiarity of the mango trees that mark Leela's assimilation into the Bangalore Bhat family. Rather, the trees' essentiality to Hindu funeral rites functions, for Leela, as both aspiration to and confirmation of spatiotemporal belonging within a societally prominent and devout Hindu household. Leela's wish to be cremated with wood from the mango trees behind their house in Bangalore (232)—even following their immigration to Vancouver—gives promise of ultimate fulfillment. Recurringly expressed in her longing to be back among the mango trees, Leela's determination to root her identity in the history of the Bangalore Bhat family challenges her move from homeland to hostland. As Leela notes later, "she had tried so hard to appropriate the world around her by renaming everything so that it would feel the same as Back Home. She had tried very hard to dislike Vancouver, to keep it at arm's length" (392).

Within this self-imposed disruption to Leela's successful diasporic subjecthood, the mango, instead of heralding the rootedness that Leela has always sought, is a reaffirmation of her liminality.

Yet, despite her years-long rejection of Vancouver as her true "home," as Leela departs on the fated Air India flight to go "back home" for the first time in years, she realizes that the notion of home has shifted without her knowing. Even while Leela continues to long for return to Bangalore, regularly reminding her children that she should be returned upon her death to Bangalore to undergo the appropriate mango- and sandalwood-scented ceremonies, Iyer notes that she and her family assimilate relatively well into Canadian life. She and Balu gain employment in traditional Canadian institutions (Balu as a professor at a college, Leela as a salesperson at The Bay) and her children grow up to be well-educated model minority citizens (Iyer 58). At the end of Leela Bhat's story, we return with her to the garden of her childhood home. As she settles into her seat aboard the Air India flight to Delhi, Leela hums a childhood song meant to describe the Shastri property, but to her surprise the words of the song have changed and with it, the landscape conjured by her imagination. The familiar has evolved to become "pine trees and hydrangeas, roses and clematis" ornamenting a house bought rather than inherited (Badami 392). As the plane takes flight, it is only from her high-altitude position in between her two homes—one actively sought and the other resentfully endured—that she becomes aware of how she belongs in each place. The plants adorning Leela's past, present, and future domestic spaces mark the shifting horizons of her belonging and suggest the attainment of a (purposefully unconscious and contented) liminality in which her ultimate advantage lies in being comfortable on both sides of the boundary. It is important to note, however, that Leela's death aboard the 1985 Air India flight also signals the great socio-political precarity of Leela's diasporic subjecthood and her increasing marginalization within the Vancouver South Asian community as a non-Sikh. Iyer argues that Leela's seemingly successful negotiation of diasporic identity places her in "an impossible subject position" among the Vancouver Sikh community and that her sacrificial death "seals her children's bond to the violent narrative of citizenship and belonging in Canada" (60). While Leela comes to accept her cultural in-betweenness while on board the flight, she does not get an

opportunity to test that sense of acceptance in daily life; instead, she "pays the ultimate price" as an othered member of the South Asian diaspora (60), denied both a return to her West Coast garden, and her dreamed-of mango wood funeral rites.

Speaking of the disruptive pedagogical work of literary historiography, Jill Didur writes, "[T]he fragmented character of historical memory suggests that the most accountable practices of remembrance do not rely on identification with the text but instead demand attention to the metaphoricity or indirectness of its 'telling'" (451). The power of literary historiography lies in its ability to attend to "the gaps between and within different perceptions of 'reality'" (448). Badami's novel is an exercise in comparative history at an individual level, allowing the reader to witness the traumas and ramifications of communal violence through the eyes of three female protagonists. In doing so, Badami draws attention to the intersections and divergences of individual experience and memory especially apparent in the gendered spatial, temporal, and socio-religious gulfs that separate family, friends, and compatriots. Inner thoughts and memories direct the narrative, and silences, gaps, and refusals signify the complexities of negotiating the effects of individual and collective trauma. This humanization of facts relies on a metaphoricity that leaves room for these gaps and silences without letting the narrative falter. Insistently dotting the landscapes of the protagonists' lives, plants are a medium by which Badami adds contour to complex negotiations of memory and identity that are always-already imperfect. As key elements in the home spaces that inform and are informed by the history and experiences of the book's lead women, plants such as the sugar cane surrounding Sharanjeet's village, the lavender of the soap imported from Canada, and the English flowers constituting Mrs. Hardy's Amritsar garden function as witnesses and presagers of the violence that shapes the lives of the characters, emblematizing the entanglements of colonial history and recurrent cycles of communal strife. Equally significant, the roses beloved by Sharanjeet-Bibi-ji in her Vancouver Taj Mahal garden are an outward expression of a carefully constructed and precariously maintained transnational diasporic domestic identity built upon the notion of immigrant success and belonging. Mango trees, culturally significant garden specimens in south India, are for Leela Bhat a symbol of

spatiotemporal belonging, a nostalgic link to the "back home" that she craves as she builds a new life in Vancouver, as well as a promise of return to that home, dead or alive. Yet paradoxically, the mango trees of Leela's past and imagined future are impediments to the building of a claimed domestic space in her diasporic home; while Bibi-ji embraces the contradictions and challenges of transnational existence in a way that roots her most firmly outside the boundaries of her birth country, Leela remains steadfast in her conceptualization of true home as the familiar domesticated landscape of Bangalore, unwittingly reaffirming the liminality she has long sought to overcome. If constructions of home are the setting for the protagonists' often painful and always challenging confrontation with the complications of diasporic life, plants contextualize these real and imagined spaces through metaphor, speaking to the power, complexity, and consequences of sensate memory and the struggle for belonging.

NOTES

1 In an author Q&A section included in the 2007 Vintage Canada edition of *Nightbird*, Badami states that her family moved regularly because of her father's job and that her parents made a point of establishing "large, intensively planted gardens full of flowers and fruit trees" in each new house (5). This childhood experience instilled in Badami a sense of the garden as a special place that functions in her life as an extension of her writing practice (6).

2 This statement is a paraphrase of Laist's argument in *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (2013), a seminal work that the authors contextualize within the growing field of critical plant studies and the special issue's focus on plant-human relationships.

3 For more on the significance and function of the *Komagata Maru* incident in *Nightbird*, see Dean 205-07.

4 For more on Jasbeer and intergenerational trauma, see Iyer 58-59.

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