



## Research article

# Colonialism, Diasporic Politics and Alternate History in Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* and Anita Rau Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*

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## Abstract

Shauna Singh Baldwin in her novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999) and Anita Rau Badami in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) take up diverse treatises which are advantageous in the construction of subjectivity of a postcolonial subject. The present article deals with Baldwin's representation of the nation and Badami's depiction of politics, which trespass borders and affect diaspora Sikhs and members of other communities. Colonialism has been one of the causes of communalism which resulted in distortions in the historical representations of the events. Both the novelists amidst religious and historical landscapes of India also make political statements in their distinctive ways. It is interesting to analyze these statements from the perspective of postcolonial discourse as both authors belong to a period when literary texts and histories are being re-examined with a counter-narrativistic assessment. Both the authors bring out the Sikh perspective on the colonial and racist policies of the British in India and the colonial/postcolonial racist attitude of majority communities in foreign lands towards ethnic minorities through the characters taken in the novels under study. Politics of extremism and fundamentalism is the crux of both the novels. The English language has been shown to have been given a special status in the colonial regime. How language becomes a tool of both subversion and oppression is an important theme in both novels. The novels interrogate written history from alternate perspectives through the turmoil of time and space in which the novels are written. Both Badami and Baldwin conceive their characters presenting them as products of their time, place and environment.

**Keywords:** colonialism, diasporic politics, alternate history



Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

## Alternate History

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Shauna Singh Baldwin in her novel *What the Body Remembers* (1999) and Anita Rau Badami in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) take up different discourses which are conducive to the construction of subjectivity of a postcolonial subject. This article deals with Baldwin's representation of the nation regarding the "imperial episteme" that exists "in everyday cultural exchange" (Hitchcock 2001, 749), and Badami's depiction of politics which trespass borders and affect diaspora Sikhs and members of other communities. Colonialism has been one of the causes of communalism which resulted in distortions in the historical representations of the events. Both the novelists amidst religious and historical landscapes of India also make political statements which are "more self-consciously historical and more self-consciously accommodating" (Pandey 2001, 205). It is interesting to analyze these statements from the perspective of postcolonial discourse as both authors belong to a period when literary texts and histories are being re-examined with a counter-narrativistic assessment.

A novel apart from being a representational genre also is an effective and powerful mode of discourse. Negotiations between history and novel are more frequent as compared with other modes of fiction. Novel has become an important medium of problematizing and questioning to a certain extent the discourse of history. The issues of 'distortion' or 'appropriation' of historical truths in fiction have been polemical. Nonetheless, history as a theme has held many literary writers captive. Literature pertains to some ideology, subject, and theme i.e. as the old saying goes - literature can never be produced in a vacuum. History, thereby, has served as a subject for fiction to a considerable number of novelists – Indian or Western - men or women. Literature and history have complimented each other since earlier times. The hybridity of history and literature is not a recent trait.

Historiographic narratives, almost eliminating the distinction between history and fiction, attempt to make the taken event 'understandable'. With the passing of time, writers have incorporated political and social events into the genre of the historical novel. In historical fiction, writers attempted to write undisclosed and concealed chapters of Indian history keeping an alternative perspective towards history with a direct reference to politics, state and nation, and Shauna Singh Baldwin and Anita Rau Badami are two such women novelists.

### **The Colonial Discourse: Analysis**

Making an important contribution to the genre of 'Empire Writes Back', both Shauna Singh Baldwin and Anita Rau Badami retrieve history introducing Sikh religion and community to the readers. Both diasporic writers from the standpoint of their Indian descent had their fair share of living in India before emigrating to the U.S. and Canada respectively. Domiciliary displacement has not barred writers from writing on sensitive subjects like Partition or communal violence and such issues share their relevance even in present times outside the boundaries of the home country. It would not be wrong to say that scholars in the past and yet today try to escape the uncomfortable moments of communal violence (Partition or 1984 riots etc.). Nevertheless, growing communal hatred in recent times has made the need to have these dialogues remain alive and open in print and visual media evermore. Shauna Singh Baldwin in her Commonwealth Prize-winning novel *What the Body Remembers* (2000) and Anita Rau Badami in her third novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* have tried "... recuperating histories squeezed out of the state's

homogenizing myth of the nation", (Mee) attempting ". . . at writing historical narratives that display a revisionary scepticism about narrow definitions of the nation." (Mee)

Sardarji, the protagonist of Baldwin's novel is an extremely vulnerable character and is a victim of the colonial discourse. Chapter IX of the novel depicts his position as a subject within the discourse of colonialism as propagated by the advocacy of the superiority of the English language, English education and English ways of living and dressing. Sardarji was just sixteen when he succeeded in persuading his father to allow him to study abroad. He considers it pertinent to study in England and learn their ways to know the oppressors and be like them and he asserts himself in a statement like, ". . . to know your adversary, you enter his mind and see from his eyes. You eat his food and feel the way it must feel to him . . . You watch his mentors and understand the qualities he admires . . ." (Baldwin 1999, 172). Sardarji even on his return to India remains a subject with a divided personality more than ever. The influence of the Western ways does not escape his life. Sardarji cultivates a dismembered identity lived through his 'English-gentleman-inside' - Cunningham.

Cunningham, Sardarji's alter-ego symbolizes the hegemonic response to contemporary colonial discourse as taken up in the novel *What the Body Remembers*. Sardarji cannot evade having discussions on every matter with him and concedes to each of his responses. Cunningham, Baldwin tells her readers:

. . . still saddles Sardarji's mind, a hoary phantom remnant of his years in England. And now Sardarji cannot remember how he thought before he learned to think with Cunningham. Cunningham, grafted so long ago, does the watching now and argues less and less as long Sardarji asks only the questions Cunningham approves of, walks and talks the way Cunningham has taught. (Baldwin 1999, 173)

The Sikh self of Sardarji keeps this part of his identity hidden from Cunningham nonetheless, it is during the chaotic socio-political scenario in the latter part of the novel that Sardarji's Sikh self takes the forefront when protests and marches begin with the arrival of the news among the masses about the inevitability of the Partition of Punjab. Indifferent and indecisive until now, he has become alert, active and decisive ever since his return from Pindi, Lahore where he witnessed a protest. Trying to find an imaginative space, between the Indian National Congress protesters and the Muslim League protestors shouting slogans on the road, watching from the window of his office, he concludes that it is too late for the Sikhs to demand a nation for themselves. Instead, he is persuaded more than ever before that the "*quom* must defend itself" (490), and so, Sardarji turns his thoughts to action by providing aid to the Sikh activist members of the Akali party.

Sardarji's [nights] are spent with . . . leaders of the Sikh Akali Party, religious men . . . entering politics as their followers look to them to forge a nation that can resist return to persecution under Islam . . . They ask him for advice, as a jagirdar, as a Sikh, as an English-speaking qualified man . . . Sardarji donates money blindly to them - "Do the needful." (Baldwin 1999, 490-91)

It is in the moments of crisis that rootedness in one's identity gets examined and usually overpowers any other subverting discourse as is evident in Sardarji. Sardarji oscillates between

the two worlds of the West and the East through Cunningham and himself. He has the peculiar subjectivity of an educated man, in a “top-notch position in the slowly-Indianizing Indian service of Engineers” (Baldwin 1999, 173). According to Michel Foucault, French philosopher and historian of ideas, for an idea to become a discourse, it requires the assent of power to back it, and over time, the idea comes to be accepted as established knowledge. The subjects of these discourses function within the parameters of such knowledge. Similarly, Sardarji learns to accept the discourse of racial superiority of the British and fails to evaluate the idea rationally.

A postcolonial subject, who has been a witness to colonial administration, must endure dual subjection - political and social, and Sardarji is no exception. Girard writes that the aim of Baldwin’s novel *What the Body Remembers* is to:

. . . provide readers with an insight into the ways through which the post-colonial Self actually constructs itself, within the frame of geographical, cultural and religious dislocation. She intended to counter the polarities regulating imperialistic systems of representation: male/woman, same/other in order to display a construction of the self on a metaphorical basis. (Girard 2007, xvii)

The dualism results from Sardarji’s hope that the British would ultimately bring good fortune for India and particularly Punjab - his native land. The legacy that he brings with him from abroad stays with him because the hope for a better future for India doesn’t let him abandon it. Belief in the fact, that to deal with the adversary it is significant to know the way they think, the way they eat etc. makes Sardarji carry an Englishman within himself as he (being on a higher position in the Irrigation Department) has to deal with the high-ups and the British officials every day.

An instance of this could be seen in the conversation between Sardarji and Cunningham in the novel *What the Body Remembers* before Sardarji musters the courage to ask Farquharson, the Indian English senior to put in a good word for him for a higher post to the Central Design Division, something which he himself despises but desperately desires as this would give him a chance to design and forward the work of the “largest earthen dam in the world, Bhakra dam” (Baldwin 1999, 231). The hope to bring progress to Indians by building the dam across the Satluj river and the plan to use all knowledge of the old and the new to join the gap between India and England on the outside, manifests through the presence of Cunningham on the inside, in Sardarji. While conversing with Cunningham, he says:

‘He who evaluates alternative designs, selects and sets the standards makes a difference for all time, can influence centuries.’ ‘You might as well have a shot at it, then,’ says Cunningham. Sardarji clears his throat, turns to Mr. Farquharson and says, ‘As you are here, there is something I would like to discuss . . . My next posting is due in a year, and I wished to ask you to put in a good word for a transfer to the Central Design Division.’ (Baldwin 1999, 231)

Power could be exercised by the oppressor in any form. It could either be through language, religion, or culture. Co-operation and obedience by the subject are pre-requisites for coercion. Similarly, language is an important part of one’s identity. History witnessed a threat of division of a nation in 1971 as a result of a nation’s rejection of acknowledgement of one language

in comparison with the other. Rejection of recognition to the Bengali language over Urdu, which was raised to the standard of a national language led to political instability in Pakistan in the 1970s.

Sardarji is highly influenced by English ways and the language. He learns English aphorisms and appoints an English tutor for his wife, Roop and the children Timcu and Pavan as discussed in the previous chapter. Miss Barlow, the tutor, asks Roop not to intermingle English with Punjabi, her mother tongue. But Roop likes and supports the language of her mother and her gurus – Punjabi. Baldwin presents Roop's views in the following words:

Miss Barlow teaches English without knowing a single word of Punjabi - she says Punjabi sounds ugly, hard and rasping . . . . Roop could be back in Bhai Takht Singh's school. "A say ah, b say buh, c say cuh." Every English letter has a name and a sound. If they spoke Punjabi she might explain to the governess, the letter and its sound are inseparable as blood and skin, one coursing with the other . . . . It is the difference in sound that makes each one special. And then it is the umbrella lines that draw them close and gives them meaning. (Baldwin 1999, 431- 432)

On repeated suggestions to Roop by the tutor about repeating cat, bat and hat Roop says to herself: "I do not have a cat. I have never seen a bat. And I do not wear a hat; I wear a chunni" (Baldwin 1999, 432), expressing her dislike for the foreign language unlike Sardarji. Satya, the first wife of Sardarji, is rational enough to gauge the imperial power of English language as becomes evident through her conversations with Sardarji. Satya puts forth the idea that, "all of us need our own idea, not foreign ideas; this is what I tell Sardarji. But he - his mind is their colony also" (Baldwin 1999, 315). Both women, as shown by the novelist, dislike the foreign language and favour their mother tongue unlike the man of the family, Sardarji. Different races have their own languages, their own pronunciations and their own meanings. Roop in *What the Body Remembers* wants the tutor to know this. The lines above representing Roop's psychology are representative of the psyche of subjects who have their own peculiarities even under the rule of an imperial power. Individualism is what they want to keep intact, but British policies and laws forbid them to do so.

Language plays an important role in Badami's novel too. Like Sardarji in *What the Body Remembers*, Khushwant Singh in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* also appoints an English tutor to teach his wife Sharan the foreign language. He writes to Sharan in a letter:

*It is important to know where you are coming from and where you are going. For this you need both languages, the language of our souls and the language of the goras. This way you will be a two-edged sword.* (Badami 2006, 33) (emphasis original)

The desire to learn the ways of the foreigners makes Sharan leave her husband's village Dauri Kalan and migrate to Amritsar in the hope of becoming like the ones in power. Most willing to undergo all turbulences, Sharan thinks to herself:

. . . to become the two-edged sword that her husband wanted her to be . . . . She would tell herself that if it had not been for the husband as enlightened as hers, she might still be an illiterate farmer's daughter, waiting stupidly for her fate to turn. But now she had the opportunity to be something better . . . (Badami 2006, 34)

The lines quoted above are an apt example of hegemonic tendencies in the subjects. Knowledge of the desire to be illuminated, educated, and be reformed like the British which was disseminated among the masses as part of an imperial policy through advocacy of the superiority of the language and English ways made people discursive subjects of the British. A historian advocates an idea in support of this view saying:

Gandhi frequently lamented that so few British could dominate so many Indians, not by dint of weapons or force, but rather by virtue of the Indians' acquiescence in their own subjugation. Gandhi felt that the British could only accomplish things in India as long as Indians let them. (Nojeim 2004, 141)

Badami and Baldwin seem to agree with this idea of Gandhi through their male characters as they become subjects of the imperialist policies of the British, leaving them confused about their own identities. Sharan, in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* too faces dual subjugation - one of imperialistic policy at the political level and second, at the social level at the hands of her husband who himself is a victim of the oppression, belonging to the diaspora community. Badami represents Sharan's dilemma, "Sharan was confused-what exactly did he want her to be? A traditional Sikh or an English *mem*?" (Badami 2006, 33).

India prior to being colonized by the British was a territory with princely states, a scenario which changed under British rule. The starting point of the atrocious rule by the British was to make the subjects learn the language of instruction - English. But the English language also became a common ground for people from different religions, ethnicities, and cultures to unite and rise against the British. Though English was learnt by a section of educated Indians, they had a role to play in facilitating nationalist ideas to the common populace. Print media also contributed in raising nationalist feelings among the people and ousting the British. Originally, intended as a medium to strengthen their reigns over India, it backfired eventually and resulted in the British losing India as one of its colonies.

Living by the English ways in every sense of the word Sardarji "has become [a] strange, rare being" (Baldwin 1999, 174). Mimicking the colonizer is one of the results of imperialism. Language is one of the tools that the state adopts to bring a change in the subjects, it becomes the Ideological State Apparatus, a term propounded by Louis Althusser. Ideology propounded by such apparatuses becomes so grounded in the minds of the subjects that they imbibe it and live it without their knowledge of it. Sardarji given to imperial policies of the time functions unaware of this fact. Homi Bhabha defines mimicry as:

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called itself that is behind. The effect is camouflage . . . It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, of becoming mottled-exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare. (Bhabha 1994, 85)

Mimicking the ways of the West has subdued his voice of resistance to an extent that even at the most crucial moments, he remains silent. A typical example of this is the boar killing incident where Sardarji utilizes his valour and energy in killing the boar not bothering about his life or that of his mare, overcoming all hurdles only to have his hard work go away easily to Mr. Farquharson, his Indian-English senior. Sardarji and Mr. Farquharson start in the twilight for pig-sticking. Mr.

Farquharson is an Indian-born Englishman and a superior in Sardarji's department. The rules for the chase set by the men are simple as, "the boar's head trophy goes to the man who first runs it to the ground and lances it" (Baldwin 1999, 252). Nonetheless, Farquharson does the unexpected. In a brazen manner he beckons his groom to bring the camera and poses for the click with the boar.

'This is preposterous,' Sardarji says to Cunningham. And Cunningham informs him it would be simply not done to point out to Mr. Farquharson that he has changed all the rules of pig sticking just as Sardarji was about to claim his trophy . . . Pen him a nasty note, why don't you? . . . Cunningham says . . . 'I can't do that Cunningham.' (Baldwin 1999, 255)

Sardarji wants to tell Farquharson that he cannot take away the credit of his hard work. He wants to tell him that, he should be given the trophy that it should be Sardarji getting his photograph with the boar. But due to the power that Farquharson exercises being his senior in the Irrigation Canal Department Sardarji refrains from voicing it no matter how desperately he wants to.

The incident of boar hunting gives an idea about the power exercised by imperial forces in interpersonal relations. Sardarji is even subjected to remarks like "You must face the fact that Indian engineers are incapable of anything but assembly. Little boys playing with Meccano sets purchased for them by the Central Design Division" (Baldwin 1999, 232). At times, Sardarji alternatively himself becomes the mouthpiece of the British in discussions with Satya. "Indians can't decide anything," he says, "Without the British, the Indian National Congress will be arguing till the next century" (Baldwin 1999, 325).

Language and nationalism also tear apart the organic wholeness of Sardarji in *What the Body Remembers* (Chapter IX). Like Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher claims, "it must be possible for the 'I think' to accompany all my representations" (Kant 1929, 152), what we perceive of the outside world is coloured by our vision of the inside world. Perception and reception of the outside is defined by the subjective influences of the individual. In Sardarji's case, Cunningham is a form of a discourse which is always present in his mind and shapes his behaviour, his perceptions and his actions.

. . . Cunningham can edit paragraphs in Sardarji's mind before realizing them for utterance, and now that he has trained Sardarji on what is Done and Simply Not Done, generally stays within the bounds of reasonable discourse. (Baldwin 1999, 173)

Cunningham's presence in Sardarji's mind could be put in words as given by two critics. "The haunting presence of a Doppelganger, in other words, his double, Cunningham, conveys the depth of identity crisis he is going through" (Ratti 2013, 147). The role of Cunningham in Sardarji's life and his contribution in forming his identity is explained by Girard in the following words:

Cunningham embodies the imperialist essence of the colonial discourse, revealing its ideological mechanisms, namely its systematic dismemberment of the self (Girard 2007, 23).

The dominance of colonial power during colonization, which Baldwin's novel *What the Body Remembers* focuses upon has various facets and are shown in different ways through the maze of political and social disturbances. The racist tinge is also brought out in the novel by

Baldwin through the colonizers visible use of power in an instance when a small crisp encounter between Jeevan, Roop's brother and the British official mounted on the horseback appears in the novel. The British official inquires after his whereabouts in a very authoritative voice. "Whoa, boy . . . What are you doing here, boy? . . . Baap ka naam?" (Baldwin 1999, 29-30).

Another incident of racism as mentioned by Baldwin is in context of the imperial policy of restriction on Salt making. Roop's father, Bacchan Singh assumes that the officer on a higher pedestal asking questions in a heavy and a stable voice, had come to inquire after salt making in the village of Pari Darwaza which he considers must have been reported by someone from the village. Bacchan Singh is afraid that again, he would have to pay the price for it as they are being charged for a basic necessity, the basic food article of all Indian cuisines - salt. Pari Darwaza is the place where salt remains are found in abundance at the salt marshes from in between the Pothawar Plateau to the Salt Range. Making salt in the village can help farmers immensely in saving themselves from the heavy tax levied by the British officials on imported salt from England. This has been one of the most important agendas brought against the British by Mahatma Gandhi in the struggle for Independence. Nojeim elaborating upon the British policy in *Gandhi and King* writes:

Ever since the Indian Salt Act of 1882, the British maintained a royal monopoly on the production, sale, and taxation of salt, which gave them an excellent means of controlling the population. Indians complained bitterly about the government monopoly, arguing that it was used more as a means of oppression than for anything else. (Nojeim 2004, 142-143)

The instance of salt-making finds an integral space in the history of pre-partition India. Gandhiji defying British laws and advocating supremacy of non-violence conducted the Salt March in 1930 making it a mass movement. Marching around 240 miles to make salt, Gandhi had precedence in the resistance offered by the peasantry in the Bardoli district with the march conducted peacefully. In Nojeim's view, "The Salt March focused attention on one of the most oppressive policies the colonial administration enforced in India. Salt was a necessity . . . not a luxury or privilege, like tea or land" (Nojeim 2004, 143).

Since the novel *What the Body Remembers* focuses upon the Sikh community and Sikh ethos, the writer takes up two historical incidents elaborately, namely the Salt Making and the Jallianwala Bagh killings. The tragic Jallianwala Bagh tragedy took place at Amritsar, which has been briefly dealt with in Chapter II. The Salt March undertaken by Gandhiji was planned such that Gandhi and his team reached Dandi just a day before the tenth anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh tragedy so as to remind the people of the colonial racist coercive policies of the British. The historical incident of the heinous massacre was part of the imperial policies of the British and has been briefly mentioned in Chapter II of the thesis. The massacre, according to a record had around 1,200 people wounded which included men, women and children and about 379 killed (Zachariah 2004, 38). After the publication of the Hunter Commission's Report on May 30, 1919, General Dyer under whose command the massacre happened was sent back to England, leaving Indian hearts simmering with anger.

Other significant incidents are instances of racist remarks made against the characters in Badami's novel through her story *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* highlighting the racist policies as practised against certain ethnic groups even in the present times. Ballu, a character in the novel,



is driving his family who have just landed on the grounds of Vancouver. A man stops beside their car after escaping from rear-ending their car and "sticking his middle finger up in the air," shouts, 'Fucking Chinese drivers! Go back where you came from!'" (Badami 2006, 108). A wrath inspired by the colour of the skin of Ballu instigated the man to use foul language against them.

Baldwin also elaborates upon the religious or caste differences which had seeped in and grown ever more with time in the pre-Partition era, especially with reference to a few Muslim characters in the novel. A child widow Gujri, lives as a household help in Bachan Singh's house. Gujri despises Huma's (a Muslim character) entrance into the kitchen. Gujri angrily shouts at her, "You shameless girl! Don't you ever come into my rasoī again!" she runs forward with a raised hand to slap her saying, "*Chi!* Dirty girl. Don't you let your shadow come near it! Huh!" (Baldwin 1999, 78).

Another instance of such caste/religion rift is seen in Gujri's attitude towards the bangle seller, who again is a Muslim by religion whom Roop approaches to buy bangles from. Gujri, "Seeing the bangle seller . . . returns with three small, bruised bananas and lays them on the ground before him" (Baldwin 1999, 66). Gujri also "has a separate copper *thal*" (Baldwin 1999, 79), to offer food to Abu Ibrahim despite talks of his holiness spread miles around. Jeevan and Ibrahim are amicable and "Jeevan touches Ibrahim . . . But Ibrahim never stays to eat after riding, nor does Jeevan offer him food" (Baldwin 1999, 79). The existence of communal disturbance between members of various communities prevailed before the violence that erupted at the time of Partition in full throttle. Roop's paternal aunt, also shouts at Khanma (a muslim woman) from the window of her second-storey house using an expletive "'Ay, kuti! Hurry up, na!" Chachi, a sweet-sweet woman, is never shrill with Roop, or Madani or Jeevan-or any high-up person - just with Khanma" (Baldwin 1999, 64). She is angry with Khanma because she is an untouchable. Like Huma, who is barred from entering into Gujri's kitchen and to whom Gujri does not hand over the drinking water but places the tumbler on the ground to be lifted up by Huma herself and again be placed there to be taken away by Gujri (Baldwin 1999, 79).

Baldwin in an interview with *The Hindu* says that "Our past - anyone's past - is fraught with moral compromises and easy rationalizations about oppression and inequality. It should constantly be subjected to scrutiny to illuminate our present." (Kandaswamy 2010, np). Intolerance for a person from a different community culminates into an abominable and detestable violence at the time of Partition. Baldwin highlights these issues with the motive of informing the present by learning from the past. In an interview given to Rich Rennicks, Baldwin talks about the parallel between colonial transgression and its mimicry by the colonized, and the need to re-examine colonial history from other perspectives:

I look at areas of silence in culture and history and try to look past the privileged narratives of the past. The history of Partition was first written by British memoirists and historians. Just as Sardarji created the problem between Roop and Satya and got off (almost) scot-free, so the British created the problem between Hindus and Muslims and got-off (almost) scot free. In the story, the children are caught in the middle, just as the Sikhs, children of the two great faiths of the subcontinent, are caught in the middle. And it's not only the British - by the end of the novel, Roop realizes "each of us has betrayed something, someone, or a part of ourselves." (Rennicks nd, np)

It is through such incidents of racism and from history discussed from the perspective of a member of Sikh community that Baldwin tries to highlight Sikhs. Placing her characters in the colonial times, she talks of the past retrieving incidents less talked about by the historians. One of the objectives of this kind of literature is to voice the role and perspective a particular community, in this case, the Sikh community. She brings forth a previously ignored standpoint into the picture. Similarly, Badami in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* traces several historical incidents from a lesser-known community's perspective.

Khushwant Singh aka Pa-ji in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* has roots in Sikh history and would time and again educate his adopted son, Jasbeer about Sikh history. Embeddedness in one's history is what Pa-ji believes in. He makes Sharan learn Punjabi alongside English. He would often tell Jasbeer, his adopted son, of his ancestral history and valour. He would often explain to Jasbeer:

Without history, you were nothing, a nobody, one of those fluffy seed-heads floating in the summer breeze, unaware of your origins, careless of your destination. Meaningless, mythless, *shapeless*. (Badami 2006, 206)

He mentions to Jasbeer the names and deeds of the Sikh patriots in pre-partition India. He mentions to him names of the great revolutionary leaders from Sikh history who laid their lives for a cause at a very young age. Pa-ji speaks about Jasbeer's violent activities in school and remarks:

He is Punjabi lion all right, he has the right instincts. I hope you showed that Jason or whatever his name was, a lesson, eh? (Badami 2006, 213)

It is because of these insinuations from the very beginning that Jasbeer starts to show traces of rebellion in him from the very start in Vancouver. He does not make friends in school because of his religio-cultural peculiarities. He is violent most of the times due to his frustration over being sent to Canada with Bibi-ji by his mother without his consent and also because of the feelings of patriotism and identification with the Sikh history recited to him often with enthusiasm by Pa-ji. It is because of these feelings and sentiments that later in the novel he gets deeply and gets deeply influenced by Dr. Randhawa who visits Canada from India to lecture upon the need of a separate nation called Khalistan for Sikhs. Dr. Randhawa is a Sikh revolutionary who persuades Sikh diaspora for violent protest through his lectures about Khalistan. He upholds a different ideology from the people living in Canada. Khushwant Singh's brand of nationalism and pride in Sikh history is peaceful and non-violent, but Jasbeer, influenced by Dr. Randhawa, is taken in by the need for violent protest. George Bryjak remarks about the Khalistan brand of Sikh extremism in India in "Communal Violence in India":

Sikhism, a religion founded by Guru Nanak in the fifteenth century, has a long and proud military tradition. Sikhs view themselves as a unique people, and some of them have attempted to establish an independent political state since 1947. . . The desire for an autonomous homeland to be called Khalistan (derived from the concept of Khalsa - a chosen race of soldier-saints), along with several other economic, social, and cultural grievances, has pitted Sikhs against their Hindu neighbours, the local police, and the federal government. (Bryjak 1986, 38)

Colonialism had dire consequences on India as a nation. The biggest consequence that imperialism had on the masses was that it divided the nation into communities of Hindu, Muslim and Sikhs. The divide-and-rule policy employed by the colonizers has played havoc on the minds of the people in terms of their communal identity is evident from a statement made by Badami in *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?*, "People huddled together on the streets, blowing into their hands to warm their fingers and fearfully discussing what would be the third war with their neighbour in the twenty-four years since Partition" (Badami 2006, 246). Similarly, the third chapter of the novel depicts the viewpoints of Indians living in the West as a result of the political upheaval back home. The divide and rule policy of the British has a lingering effect when the story reaches appoint where communal tensions are seen in Indian diaspora:

. . . two Pakistani regulars, Hafeez and Alibhai, were absent from their usual table . . . old enmities, ancient sorrows, were carried around like the hag who climbed onto the backs of unwary sailors, growing heavier and heavier until the poor sailors, unable to shake off, dropped dead from exhaustion (Badami 2006, 249).

Even in contemporary times, the hearts remain divided and wars still continue between India and Pakistan over the territorial possession of Kashmir with both countries claiming their right to possession over it. The people are still bearing the brunt of the division which seems not to have settled even after about sixty-nine years of Partition of the subcontinent. However, the leaders of the pre-partition days and those who rose after Partition glorified the independence of the nation. Contrary to it, both novelists through the characters in their novels demystify the political national. Nimmo's husband criticizes Indira Gandhi for her policies and false promises in *Can You hear the Nightbird Call?* In confluence with the idea of history as fluid and subjective, and with the political incidents forming the basis of the stories, the national leaders are undeified and demonized in the two novels. The writers in a postmodernist vein interrogate the discourse of history bereft of any monolithic truth.

In the novel by Baldwin spanning over ten years of pre-partition India (1937-1947), references have been made to several national leaders, most importantly Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah. They have been revered and spoken in high esteem by the general masses in their respective countries. However, Baldwin questions this attitude of reverence in her novel. *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* by Badami on the other hand, covers political incidents till the 1985 Air India Flight bombing so reactions of people about Indira Gandhi during crucial political turns in history are taken up by the writer. A few instances in the novels could be discussed thus:

Sikhs in Baldwin's novel do not come to attend the Ram-Lila as they have anger against Gandhi for his lack of support to the young lad Udham Singh, who killed Michael O'Dwyer in London. Bacchan Singh further grunts, "If the assassin had not been a Sikh . . . Mahatma Gandhi might not have seen those bullets as 'insanity'" (Baldwin 1999, 331). Jinnah is despised by Sardarji as he considers him not a pure Muslim. Sardarji says, "not to take Mr. Jinnah seriously, for he is by no means an observant Muslim-he drinks, and Sardarji is reassured by that (Mr. Jinnah also smokes, a weakness that Sardarji does not find reassuring)" (Baldwin 1999, 330). In another incident Sardarji, derides Gandhi for his deed of letting the subcontinent get divided into India and Pakistan, "Gandhi and the Hindus do not lose anything by giving Pakistan to Jinnah from Punjab, because Pakistan will consume mostly Sikh-owned land." (Baldwin 1999, 491)

The life of characters and the political incidents are so intricately woven together that only an acute reasoning could separate them, as lives of characters are being shaped by the political incidents. Similarly, characters hold alternate views towards politicians, in Badami's *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* thus rendering historiography another perspective:

In 1971 (Chapter XIII). Indira Gandhi comes to the Ram-Lila field to deliver a speech and Nimmo, Satpal's wife is more than excited to be an audience to it. Nimmo is enamoured by the politician as she finds a role model for herself in her. "Strength, conviction, persistence" are qualities which Nimmo wants to imbibe from the leader and thinks is a lesson for every woman, for the leader has survived turbulences in a man's world (Badami 2006, 218).

Unlike Nimmo, Satpal sharing a troubled history with the Sikhs, holds a grudge against the leader for he considers her responsible in part for the downfall of the Sikhs. He laments to Nimmo before she leaves for the speech:

All these politicians play games with us and we, like fools, keep voting for them again and again. She takes away our river water and gives it to Rajasthan, she cuts up Punjab and creates a Haryana for the Hindus, and now she is planning to give them Chandigarh as well. That city belongs to Punjab. First it was Partition and half of our land disappeared. Now our own leaders are chopping it up like a piece of meat. How much more are we supposed to give away? Without Punjab this country would be starving and look how we are treated – like stepchildren! Is it fair? (Badami 2006, 220)

Satpal's succeeds in influencing Nimmo in her perception of the leader, she contemplates her speech: "She had heard versions of the same speech before and knew there was truth to what Satpal had said about a politician's worthless promises" (Badami 2006, 225). This shows the fragility of alternate discourses in the face of a consistent process of culturization and construction.

## Conclusion

Both the authors bring out the Sikh perspective on the colonial and racist policies of the British in India and colonial/postcolonial racist attitude of majority communities in foreign lands towards ethnic minorities through the characters taken in the novels under study. Politics of extremism and fundamentalism is the crux of both the novels. The English language has been shown to have been given a special status in the colonial regime. How language becomes a tool of both subversion and oppression is an important theme in both novels. Thus, the novels interrogate written history from alternate perspectives through the turmoil of time and space in which the novels are written. Both Badami and Baldwin conceive their characters presenting them as products of their time, place and environment.

## Declaration of Conflicts of Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest.

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